

Lord Voldemort found himself resisting the urge to pace restlessly. The room was devoid of any company. His recent bout of fury had sent everybody scurrying for cover, the smarter ones out of the room as soon as Severus Snape uttered the last few words. The ones who had taken longer to comprehend what was being said, had stared on, bewildered, only to have his roar of fury reverberate in their ears. They were the ones who had been at the receiving end of the Cruciatus curse and had to crawl their way out. He grit his teeth, his eyes narrowed to red slits. A Prophecy... After all his hard work, all his blood (literally, more often than he cared to remember) and sweat expended to reach the plane of power he had always dreamt of... The stronger part of his brain, logic driven, was telling him that it didn't matter. Nobody, let alone some ordinary brat born to blood traitors and filth, could undo his existence. He was invincible. Immortal. Even if the sorry excuse of a wizard or witch did, somehow, strip his current form of its power, he would always arise from the shadows. He had made sure of that.

And yet, the quieter voice in his head, the one that still managed to hold on to the smallest fraction of fear and insecurity, was wondering if it was possible... Had he left some ends untied? Had he made any small errors? He snarled at the voice. Lord Voldemort made no mistakes. And yet...

It wouldn't do. This doubting... the vestiges of fear... He knew it had to end. The threat had to be contained. Right away. Snape's recitation rang in his ears.

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies..." Snape had whispered, shuddering as felt his lord's rage slowly seep through his skin, like a poisonous gas. Damn Dumbledore to darkest, merciless corners of hell. If only he knew what the rest of it was. It doesn't matter, the logic driven voice reminded him. Nip it in the bud; After all, what could a child do to him?

"Rookwood." Lord Voldemort's voice was a soft hiss. His Death Eaters may have fled the room, but he knew they were lingering beyond the door, waiting anxiously. And just as he had expected, Augustus Rookwood scrambled in, his head down, trembling. "You will monitor the registration of newborns. I believe a record of all magical children is directly transferred from Mungo's to the Ministry.

Mark the month of July." Rookwood froze. Lord Voldemort could hear his unspoken astonishment. He could hear his questions as they flashed through his mind. Surely, his Lord wasn't too worried about this prophecy? Could it be...? Voldemort could hear Rookwood's struggle as he fought to keep his doubt out of his mind. His newly born doubt as to whether it was possible that his Lord might be vanquished after all. Voldemort's eyes flared open in anger. How dare he even think such a thing?

"Crucio." Rookwood's screams, loud and piercing, were a complete contradiction to Voldemort's soft hiss. As the man by his feet struggled to regain his breath, he raised his voice just a little bit, for the benefit of his followers outside the room. "Do you, Augustus, think I am afraid? Do you actually believe that I am vulnerable enough to be destroyed by some filthy, ordinary wand waving fool who isn't even born yet?" Rookwood trembled. "No my lord," he whispered brokenly, "I would never..." "And yet you do let such thoughts occur." Voldemort hissed dangerously, cutting off Rookwood's plea. "Let it be known, Augustus, I fear nothing. But Lord Voldemort is no fool. Anything that threatens me will be destroyed. You, my faithful servant, should know that by now. Get out of my sight now, before I decide to show you what it is to really be at the receiving end of my wrath." Rookwood didn't need to be told twice.

The queasiness that had overtaken him as soon as his rage had subsided continued to unsettle him. He knew, that the time had come. He had always been fascinated by the idea but had never found the need. He wondered if he was going overboard with his paranoia. Surely, the Horcruxes would hold! Even Albus Dumbledore wouldn't be able to work out the reason he was invincible. And even if he did, how could the old fool possibly track all of them down? The Horcruxes were fail-proof. But he needed a safety net. The prophecy had induced an irrational fear that he had never felt before. For the first time ever, he felt exposed and vulnerable.

Lord Voldemort did not set much store by divination and subtlety. Yet, he was shaken to the very core and a childish urge to go further to protect himself rose like bile in his throat. He knew he would do this after all. It was time to cross the Atlantic and lose himself in the Chilean landscape once more. Smiling grimly, he strode out of the room.

The Mapuche settlement at the edge of the Atacama desert was a small one. They were a small tribe, a tiny sect that had broken off and escaped during the war with the Mayans hundreds of years ago. Much to their own surprise, they had endured. Their numbers had hardly ever risen, remaining steady through the years. The old man stared unseeingly at the sparkling, blue Pacific Ocean. The air was unnaturally still and the waves seemed almost muted. Too calm. He was over a hundred years old. He had barely been thirteen when the tribe chose him to be the guardian of their ancient secret. He found himself wondering, as he had many times in his life, where on earth had his ancestors managed to procure something so terrible. There had always been murmurs throughout the continent, that their line had been protected by Magik, powers beyond human comprehension. It was inherent fear that kept the Mayans and the Spaniards from putting too much energy into annihilating them. They were studiously ignored and the treatment was reciprocated. The unspoken truce held to this day. He had met travellers, both mere mortals seeking what they knew was beyond their understanding, as well as magical folk who thought they knew what it was all about, but really, knew nothing at all. Between the two groups, it was the latter that irked him. Wand-waving delusional imbeciles who could fill glasses with water and create pretty sparks... He often found that non-magical people who believed in greater powers were more attuned to large paradigm shifts and shimmers of magical unrest. He supposed their suspicion and natural wonder enabled them to tune in and feel it even if they couldn't see or manipulate it. Of course, this group consisted of a very small fraction of the Muggle population. Most were so trapped within their own existence, they rarely saw even what was hard and solid and non-magical. That was their level of pre-occupation. He felt a small twinge of envy. How he wished he were one of them.

But the magical folk were the ones that induced stress in his otherwise silent, peaceful life. His people always seemed to understand when to let things be and that some powers should not be meddled with. But the ones across the oceans never seemed to get that idea into their head. Pale creatures from the North, coming in from the east across the Amazon, who believed everything could be harnessed. That everything could be controlled. He felt frustration and contempt rise just at the thought of them. Most were curious excitable tourists or travellers. Some far too keen for their own good, but never capable of serious damage. And then, there were wizards

like him. The old man shivered in spite of the heat radiating off the sands from the desert. It had been over two decades since he had vanished from this side of the world. The wizard who called snakes to him. His slit-like red eyes had given the old man nightmares for years after that. He may not have ever stepped out of his tribe's boundaries and experienced the world at its fullest, but he knew evil when he saw it. He could also recognize madness and the red eyed, pale, snake-loving wizard was the very epitome of it. As he felt the air stir and still, over and over again, he wondered if the unease in the atmosphere was a sign.

The old man knew he would return. Lord Voldemort had left them alone last time because he hadn't been sure if he could wrest the secret from the tribe. He had not wanted to try fighting the famed protective Magik. But the Old Man had heard whispers from across the ocean. Lord Voldemort was stronger now. He was taking control. And it would only be a matter of time when he returned. The old man was no fool. Lord Voldemort, for all his cruelty and assuredness, had harboured deep seated compulsive paranoia and ruthless possessive determination, which the Old Man could see leering beneath the pale skin. He knew, there would come a day when Lord Voldemort would be threatened and he would return here, to take what he and his tribe had been protecting. The Old man couldn't help but think that Lord Voldemort was now traversing across the Atlantic, looming closer. And he knew that this time around, they were all doomed. It was time for him to call the next guardian. But this one's task would not be to protect. This guardian would have to help the poor soul threatening the dark lord understand what had happened when the curse had run its course. Someone who could make the light see the truth before the past, present, ghosts and phantoms created by fear and mistrust destroyed them all. Someone who had to run away right now and wait till the time was right.

They stood in a circle, silent and tensed. Their Lord was expected to return that night. In the mute assembly, a small, round figure restlessly shifted. He was anxious. It had been a year since he had been inducted, but he never really got used to all the dark ceremony and sobriety. He wondered if he had made a mistake in doing this. But he knew he would be lying to himself if he thought there was another way. Friendship and camaraderie were fine ideals when they were children. But they were grown men now and they walked their own paths. He swallowed the lump in his throat. He would never be smart enough, funny enough or even likeable enough. Even an abomination of a werewolf like Remus had exponentially more number of friends than he did.

There's no looking back, he told himself. They picked their side and I picked mine. 'You didn't pick a side you coward,' a voice that sounded like Sirius hissed in his head. 'You don't have the courage to do that. You're a traitor who doesn't have the guts to decide and publicly proclaim where your loyalties lie. Rat!'

At that moment Peter wondered what would be worse - The Dark Lord's wrath or facing his friends flanked by Death Eaters in a battle. He hoped he would never have to find out either way.

His musings were interrupted by a swish of a dark cloak at the centre of the circle. The Dark Lord had returned and judging by the despotic smile on his face, Peter guessed that his mission must have been successful. The relief was overwhelming and seemed to settle in the circle as if they'd all taken a sip of Calming Draught.

Rookwood took a step forward and bowed deep. The Dark Lord inclined his head towards him and signalled for him to speak. "My Lord," he murmured, "There are only two possibilities - Neville Longbottom and Bella Potter."

Peter's breath caught in his throat. His head spun and he felt numb. Bella...Surely... The Dark Lord doesn't think Bella could be the one? He won't, he consoled himself. Bella was half blood as Lily was a muggleborn. The Longbottom child was pure blood. Only he could possibly be an equal to the Dark Lord.

Lord Voldemort stared at something at a distance. The silence became long and drawn out. Finally Lucius Malfoy stepped forward. His arrogant drawl was laced with excitement. "My Lord, let me

leave now for the Longbottom's lair. The child will be no more in less than an hour!" Peter fought his mind as it started flashing the images of smiling, cheery Alice and Frank Longbottom. He felt a shadow of regret pass over him. The Dark Lord would spare no-one. Peter knew that. They had been friends and good people. And this is why, my choice is the inevitable one, he thought grimly to himself.

Lord Voldemort finally spoke up "The Potter girl. The mother is a Mudblood, is she not? The child is a halfblood..." he trailed off. Peter felt cold and reassured at the same time. Yes! He wanted to say. Halfblood! No threat at all!

Almost as if he had heard what was going on in Peter's mind, he slowly turned to him and looked at him curiously. "Pettigrew, you are familiar with the child. Tell me about her." Peter stared at him in frightened bewilderment. Why is he still talking about Bella? And tell him what exactly?

He opened his mouth and closed it again. Lord Voldemort stared at him, then raised his wand. Peter braced himself for the Cruciatus. He gasped when he felt the Dark Lord invade his mind, shuffling through his memories, till they settled on Bella - an image of the beautiful child, her dark wavy hair, startling green eyes and the dimpled, one sided smile that was a James Potter trademark. Voldemort lingered on that memory for a long time. Peter felt him pull out and released the breath he hadn't realised he had been holding. When he looked up, he felt the blood drain from his face. The Dark Lord had a gleam in his eyes. His smile was grim and he suddenly looked decided.

"Bella Potter, her blood traitor father and mudblood mother must be annihilated. The threat must be contained." He softly said, not taking his eyes off Peter. "Pettigrew, it is time to prove your worth."

Voldemort beckoned to him. Stumbling, he stepped forward, bowing low and fighting the grief raging inside him. James, Lily... Forgive me.

Lord Voldemort reached inside his cloak and pulled out what seemed like a long silver blade. The blade, Peter realized, had markings on them. Runes, maybe? He watched as Voldemort held it between the tip of both his index fingers, staring down at it with a pensive expression. "This is where I must break it." He whispered out loud. He held out one end to Peter. "Hold the other end,

Pettigrew." His voice retained its soft, deadly tone. Peter grasped the end of the blade pointed at him, waited with bated breath and the feeling that something monumental was going to occur. Without warning, the ground beneath him began to shake and cracks began to appear. Before any of them could make sense of what was happening, blinding white light streamed through the cracks and a low, grinding noise was heard.

It was over as quickly as it started. The Death Eaters stared, stunned. Nobody dared to ask the questions reeling in their minds.

Everyone looked on wearily, but the ground looked the same as it had minutes ago. Yet something felt wrong. They could feel the shift in the air. Power vibrated in the atmosphere.

Voldemort smiled in satisfaction. It had worked. Looking down, he said in his usual high voice, "Pettigrew, you will ensure that the Potter family is mine for the taking."

"Yes, my Lord." came the whispered reply.

Ten feet away, Severus Snape recalled a distant memory of having heard that Bella Potter had her mother's eyes. Just as Pettigrew resolved to stay firm on his decision to serve the Dark Lord because it was the safest thing to do, Severus resolved to go back into the light, even if the consequences meant a painful death.

Albus Dumbledore could feel the revelry sparking through the air. He had hoped and waited for this day for so many years, but now that it was finally here, he felt weighed down. Voldemort had finally been vanquished, but the price had been far too high. He waited, brooding, in the inky darkness that shrouded Privet Drive. He glanced up at the neat, suburban house and the heaviness in his chest went up a couple of notches. Albus was under no false notions as far as the Dursleys were concerned. Lily's infamous seething sessions that were particularly fiery after a family get-together were informative enough. His silent observations of Petunia, Vernon and Dudley left him with the notion that Lily had actually been kind in her description of them.

The roar of a powerful engine crashed down from the sky, startling him. He tensed immediately, reaching for his wand. Sirius Black... His grip tightened. Of all the terrible things that had happened, this

was the worst of them all. Albus struggled with himself, even as the motorbike continued its descent, asking himself why he had not seen it. Had there been signs he had missed? Even now, with everything said and done, he found it hard to swallow. Sirius Black-wizard extraordinaire, loyal friend, renouncer of the dark side and the other half of James Potter ... traitor and murderer...

Albus was relieved when he realized that the figure atop the bike wasn't Sirius. "Hagrid!" he exclaimed in relief, loosening his grip on his wand "Where did you get the bike?" Hagrid effortlessly lifted himself off the seat and peered down at him. "Young Sirius Black lent it to me, sir. Poor bloke, shaken to the core. Their bodies..." Hagrid choked off, unable to finish. Albus tensed up again. He shook his head. The when and whys could wait. Right now, another painful task awaited him.

Albus held out his hands and Hagrid gently, with tenderness that belied his large frame, placed a small bundle on them. Albus stared down at the sleeping baby. Her cherubic face was framed by dark hair, her expression peaceful. He knew under the closed lids, her eyes sparkled a green that reminded him of woods on the mountain slopes... And there, under the fringe of hair, a scar that was shaped liked a lightning bolt. Albus traced it lightly with the tip of his finger. The child stirred in her sleep.

Swallowing hard, Albus silently approached the door. Hagrid, unaccustomed to asking any questions, watched him with increasing unease. As Albus bent down to place the bundle by the door mat, Hagrid sucked in a sharp breath. "Professor... What in the world...? You can't... You... No!" he looked horrified. Albus turned to him, his eyes heavy. He looked twice his age. "It's the only choice, Hagrid. They are the only blood relatives she has." Hagrid was shaking his head, the horror struck expression not leaving his face. Albus gently reached out, touching his arm. "It's the only place she'll be safe. Trust me." Hagrid stared at the old man's face, hearing his silent plea. Silently both of them turned away, refusing to look back, afraid that their strength would fail them and they would waver.

The motorbike roared to life and soared upwards. The glowing orbs that had been trapped in the deluminator were released and the street was lit once again. Albus cast one last look at the sleeping child. Before he vanished, he whispered softly, "Forgive me, Bella..."

James fidgeted uneasily, wishing that the meeting would end already. On either side of him, Lily and Sirius looked like they were doing their best to put their unease at the back of their mind and focus on what Dumbledore was saying as well, but their largely blank expressions told James they were preoccupied, like him. He wondered, for the hundredth time that night, whether his daughter was safe. Has Wormy fed her dinner? I hope he's being careful with her... he loves tossing her in the air and the last time she almost hit her head on the door frame... He better not have crumbled to her pouting and given her that accursed toy broom... She goes completely mental on that and he may not be able to handle her... I wonder... He shook his head and tried to plug all the small worries.

He wished, for the thousandth time that night that he had stayed home with his little girl. He knew his presence here was of utmost importance. Being an Auror, he was one of the leading soldiers in the fight against the Death Eaters. As a member of the Order of the Phoenix, he was one of the few in the group who held a strong position within the Ministry and could take quick action when required. The same held true for Auror Sirius and Healer Lily. All three of them had been eager for the night out, after being cooped up in Godric's Hollow for weeks. Keen, but extremely reluctant. It had taken a lot of persuasion from Wormtail to get them to agree to come.

'For God's sake, Prongs! I'm going to stay in the house with Bella! There's no way he can come in unless he catches me first, slightly impossible given I'm inside the very house I'm secret-keeping. Dumbledore needs you three. The last attack on the Ministry stacked too many odds against us. Don't worry, I'll keep her safe.'

Good old Wormtail, thought James. He had even refused to let Sirius be the 'apparent' secret keeper. Cool it, Paddy. I can take care of myself. He was amply surprised by the sudden show of bravado from his small friend. He was pleased that Peter had developed some confidence. In times like these, it felt like it was all they had.

He glanced around, his eyes stopping at the empty chair where Moony usually sat. He felt guilt riddle his chest. It didn't matter what the rest of the order thought. Moony would never betray him. But everyone had pulled the werewolf card, numbers dictating that he be kept out of this meeting. It was the same reason he wasn't told that

the Potters were going under the Fidelius protection and he had been assigned to spy on werewolves in Germany-far away from here.

Just when he was considering excusing himself, Dumbledore looked up and him and smiled. Chuckling he said, "James, Lily, Sirius... the rest of the meeting is just detailing the logistics. We can convey the plan to you later. Why don't you go home? I'm sure Bella must be wondering where you are and God save Peter if she is one of her persistent moods."

James felt a rush of gratitude towards the old man. Literally jumping up, he threw everyone there a big grin, a hurried 'Ciao!' and rushed out, Sirius and Lily at his heels. The three of them apparated just outside of Godric Hollow's boundaries.

"Blimey, I thought Moody would never shut up!" exclaimed Sirius. "I swear if I have to hear him discuss the possibility of Death Eaters saving bodies from our side to turn them into Inferi once more, I'm going to come dressed up as a zombie the next time and spend the whole time telling him his brain smells delicious!"

Lily chuckled. "And then we can all go trick-or-treating. I'll come dressed as a witch."

James was about to comment when he suddenly noticed that it was unusually bright. He froze. And looked up.

Above the roof, shimmering in the air, the Dark Mark loomed.

His senses closed up and his mind went blank. He dimly registered Lily's screaming and Sirius's howl of denial. A shrill laugh sounded in his ears.

He ran. He tore through the porch and crashed into the house. The living room was unusually in order. There was no sign of a struggle. He ran upstairs, praying to any God that might be listening. Please... Please not Bella... I'll do anything... Absolutely anything...

The door to Bella's room was half open. He slammed it against the wall and stepped in.

His brain shut down. His lips parted in a silent scream. On the floor by her crib, his baby daughter lay still. Her eyes were open wide and the green sparkle was replaced by a glassy stillness that accompanied death.

Something inside James Potter shuttered and died at that moment and it would be fifteen years hence before he was truly alive once more.

Talk about anti-climatic.' Bella looked about her helplessly. She leaned against the coffee kiosk between platforms 9 and 10, looking for signs of abnormality, anything that would serve as a gateway into platform 9 and three-quarters. She amused herself by imagining the expression on Dudley's face if she returned home, armed with wand and all, claiming to have missed the train.

Bella was not in the habit of trying to antagonize the Dursleys. They got pretty mad at her for doing absolutely nothing and she reckoned it would be nothing short of suicidal to actually push their buttons. But since the Hagrid fiasco, the world had changed for the better for her. Now they gave her a wide berth and squawked fearfully when she as much as moved a muscle. Dudley's pig-tail served as constant reminder to her Aunt and Uncle that their niece was no longer alone in their constant battle of wills. Suddenly, the whole freak universe had waltzed into their lives as they tried to outrun the owls and letters addressed to her.

Right now, Bella wished she had checked her ticket in front of Hagrid so that she could've asked him where the hell platform 9 and three-quarters could be found. It was unusually cold for this time of the year and Bella was already feeling edgy about having no idea where to go while she dragged a trunk full of spell books, a wand and an owl. She paused to pull out her new sweater from her back-back, feeling grateful that Hagrid had thought to change some of her money to muggle currency. He had wanted her to buy some 'decent' clothes and keep food-stock. 'That's not to say the Dursleys would dare mistreat you now...' he had assured her. He had wanted her to indulge. She didn't miss the way his eyes darkened as he surveyed her slender, haggard form swathed in her cousin's oversized jeans and sweatshirt. Bella honestly didn't care what she wore, having been deprived of any luxury of choice, barring a multitude of Dudley's worn, ugly clothes. She had to admit though; it felt nice to be wearing halfway decent clothes. She attracted a lot less attention and fewer disapproving murmurs about her dishevelled, 'delinquent' appearance.

"... packed with muggles, as usual... Hurry up Ron... Fred stop that!" Bella perked up at the word 'muggles'. She spun on her heel, scanning the crowd for the source of the voice. And there they were. A plump short woman with a kind face was gently ushering forward the group of children surrounding her – four boys (two of them identical. Twins?) and a small girl, all with flaming red hair.

Molly Weasley glanced at the clock overhead which told her she had fifteen minutes to get the boys into the train. A mother of seven she was a veteran at surviving the madness that was inevitably the norm of the house. But that didn't stop her from getting hassled every now and then. She bounced on the balls of her feet as Percy disappeared behind the barrier, followed by Fred and George. She felt a familiar lump in her throat. She wouldn't see them till Christmas. Trying not to think about the fact that Ginny would go to school next year, leaving her alone at home, she looked about for Ron. She was interrupted by a soft, nervous voice. "Um... Ma'am?"

She looked down and her eyes widened. To her right stood a young girl, armed with a trunk, a cage perched on top which housed a sleeping snowy owl. 'A first year!' She smiled at the child kindly. "Yes, my dear?"

The girl continued to look nervous. In the same soft voice, "Sorry... it's just that... I don't know how to get to the platform."

Molly melted at the sight of the girl. She looked fragile. 'And extraordinarily beautiful.' The girl's slender frame sported simple muggle jeans and a plain t-shirt. Her dark, wavy hair went down to her back, framing her face. Her eyes... Molly was transfixed by how they looked like emeralds. 'Must be a Muggleborn.' Molly thought sympathetically. She looked around for her parents, but found none. She felt a jolt of surprise. 'She can't possibly be alone!'

Molly turned her attention back to girl. "It's easy dear. Just go right through the barrier. Best take it at a run if you're nervous. Ron here, he's going to Hogwarts for the first time too."

The girl smiled shyly at her son who returned it with a tentative one of his own. Taking a deep breath she turned her attention to the barrier. Ginny, who had been watching the exchange quietly, suddenly called out. "Don't worry! Best of Luck." The girl turned to her and flashed her a lopsided grin and a whispered "Thanks". Molly blinked. That smile looked so familiar... Before she could work it out, the girl had begun running and within seconds she vanished.

Twenty minutes later, as she and Ginny, stepped back into the muggle station, she pondered over what the twins had said. And she realized why she had found the smile familiar. James Potter had

flashed her that very grin when she ran into him at St Mungo's. She had taken Ron for his scheduled six month see-through, where jubilant James was whooping to everyone that he was now the proud father of a baby girl, who unfortunately was too beautiful for her own good and that he would hex anyone who came near her. He was flanked by Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and Peter Pettigrew who were roaring with laughter at the passing-by healer's askance look.

She felt a swooping sensation as she remembered that Sirius Black was in Azkaban for murdering Pettigrew and spying for You-Know-Who. And she felt tears swimming in her eyes as she re-registered that Bella had come alone. She wondered why life had to be so unjust to people who clearly didn't deserve it.

Remus took a long swig of Firewhisky, losing himself to the burning in his throat. He settled deeper into the plushy armchair, letting his mind wander. Normally, he would be distracted by Sirius and James' blabble or Lily's calm, measured words. But tonight was one of those nights, where the cracks in the walls they had built suddenly went centre stage. He knew James had locked himself in his study, bouncing a Quaffle or staring unseeingly as his snitch fluttered around the room. Lily had mumbled something about needing to go through some patient records. She would most likely be in her and James' bedroom, crying. And Sirius, he knew, would be chugging down a large bottle of Firewhisky, sitting in a corner of the room. These nights happened once in a way, but every time they did occur, Remus was transported to Halloween, 1981. Ten years down the line, the grief was rampant and it happened in spurts, on days like these.

Remus always believed that the Marauders were strong. That they would bounce back. And it sure seemed like they would weather through it at first. But as the years passed him by, he knew it was all utter bullshit. They were broken, hurting and they had no idea how to comfort each other or themselves. The war, Peter's betrayal and Bella's death... it had left them reeling. It had been too big a blow.

The war continued to rage around them. The light and the dark took turns in winning battles. The war itself just got messier, with the end nowhere in sight.

James and Sirius were hailed as heroes. They were the best Aurors and looked up to throughout the wizarding community. But anybody

who had seen them fight, would admit that there was something frightening about the reckless, wild manner they went about it. Sure they were bloody brilliant. But Remus knew that their ferocity stemmed from an unspoken desire for vengeance and fury. Lily took refuge in working as an emergency on-field medi-witch. Remus could no longer a spy. Everybody knew, without a doubt, where his allegiance lay. He did background work and studied curse breaking and worked out battle plans and logistics.

They lived in Godric's Hollow together, each of them refusing to break away. They needed each other and were fiercely protective of one another. Over the years, the banter resumed and on most days it was like school again, with Lily taking Peter's place. She had a better sense of humour anyway. But Remus knew it would never be entirely normal. He had hoped Lily and James would grieve and move on. They never did. He had hoped they would have more children. He was becoming increasingly convinced that too, would never happen. He knew that it was an unspoken decision taken by both of them. They would not bring another child into this mess. They would not lose another one. Remus had yet to understand Sirius. Remus had been heartbroken about Bella. He had been her beloved Uncle Moony. Her First word had been 'Mooey' much to James' annoyance and Lily's amusement. 'Doesn't being the lame Dad singing funny rhymes all the time and chasing behind out of contro,l bewitched toys entitle you to perks like being her first word? Geez Bella! Unfair!' Her death had hurt Remus like hell, it still did.

But Sirius's pain seemed beyond compare. Remus wondered about the strange bond the two had shared. Bella and Sirius gravitated towards one another like waves crashing on a shore. Godfather and god-daughter – they would spend evenings with her in his arms as they indulged in all important baby talk. Brash, flippant Sirius Black became mush when she was around him. Both of them seemed to need each other like oxygen. It had been bizarre, and admittedly funny, when Sirius succumbed to every one of her insistent demands and actually went on war with Lily about giving her chocolate. He took his Godfather responsibilities so seriously that even James made fun of him for it.

Sirius spent his 'off' days in Bella's old room, leaning against her crib getting drunk. He was the only one who ever entered that room. James and Lily were forever haunted by the image of the child lying

dead, and mentally cordoned off the space. Sirius on the other hand, seemed to find some comfort there.

Remus spent his off days forcing himself to relieve his life. It was his way of partaking in the group suffering sessions.

He wished they would all sit and talk about it. He wished the words 'Wormtail/Peter' and 'Bella' weren't forbidden by unspoken agreement. He wished they all had the balls to face it and deal with their regret and guilt in a more healthier manner.

Remus knew he would never take the initiative. What could he possible say anyway?

He sighed and put his empty glass down. It's just for a night, he told himself. Tomorrow morning everything would be alright. James and Sirius would fight over the pancakes, Lily would threaten them by telling them she's cook the muggle way and make them wait longer and he would pass wry comments, while helping Lily in the kitchen.

And ten years' worth of unspoken words would hang in the air, waiting to be noticed.

Severus stormily walked across the castle grounds, trying to clear his head. The last one year had been frustrating beyond belief. He would remember the night of September 1st, 1991 as long as he lived. He had been sitting in his usual place in the staff table, drumming his fingers, trying to block out the useless drivel that served as conversation among his fellow teachers. He grit his teeth at Quirrel's stuttering. Something about him just drove Severus up the wall. He seemed so... wrong. A sudden silence had swept through the hall as the first years lined up for sorting. Severus was far too used to this to even bother looking up. He clapped along with the others mechanically, when suddenly...

"Potter, Bella!"

His head snapped up so fast, he was sure his spine had cracked. It can't be... He furiously started the mental math. Ten years? Is it time already? Panic flooded him, choking him. But I'm not ready! I can't face her yet! Why the bloody hell didn't Dumbledore warn me? He furiously rounded on the old man seated next to him. But Albus was looking intently at the small girl seated on the stool, the oversized hat falling over her eyes, obscuring her face.

That's when Severus realized the Hat seemed to be taking an unusually long time. Whatever for? he wondered bitterly. She's Potter's daughter. The Golden girl who saved the wizarding world. Just shove her into the Griffon's lair already.

But the hat remained silent. And Dumbledore tensed up. Severus felt the tendrils of hope coil slowly around him. Could it be...? Maybe... Just Maybe...

"Gryffindor!" proclaimed the Hat; instantly destroying any hope Severus had that the child wouldn't take after her asshole of a father. Lily had been Gryffindor too... Severus ground his teeth furiously.

He watched the child for the rest of the night. She was unusually pretty, Severus noted. Excellent. One more reason for her to be pig-headed, he thought sourly. He continued to intently search for James Potter, but was surprised to find that there was nothing distinctly Potter about her. Well yes, she had his hair. But really, she was a blend of both of them. A perfect fusion of both her parents. Hmmm... Maybe I'll survive this with dignity intact after-all.

Then she looked up and their eyes met. And Severus felt his heart break into a million pieces. Green orbs. Lily-fucking-Evans' eyes. Severus didn't sleep a wink that night.

The next day at breakfast, he found himself looking for her anxiously at the Gryffindor table. She had been small for her age. Was she eating properly? Was she scared? Was she alone? He spotted her next to a taller boy, with bright red hair. No doubt, another Weasley. Both of them seemed to be studying their time-table intently, when Fred and George Weasley sat beside the two of them. One of them (Severus could never really make out which one was Fred and which one was George, not that he cared to try too hard. Both of them got on his nerves as they reminded him very strongly of Potter's little gang.), said something that was supposedly funny. Bella laughed. And Severus felt bile rise in his throat. James-fucking-Potter's insufferable smile. His concern for the girl evaporated and he seethed for the rest of the day. Of course, she would be her father all over again.

He gave her hell that first class and continued to do so at every opportunity. After all, she couldn't concoct a potion to save her life, was stubborn and incapable of respect. She was excellent in the Quidditch field. It didn't matter to Severus that she was Seeker, not Chaser like her father. Tomayto Tomarto...

He would never admit to anyone that he still observed her eating habits, he still kept checking that she didn't get into fights (something that Draco Malfoy was making very difficult)

He would never admit how his heart was in his mouth while she struggled to stay atop her broom, as he muttered the counter curse.

His heart almost gave out when he found out that the girl had gone after Quirrel on her own, with no help save her two imbecile friends – Granger and Weasley.

A week after the whole disaster involving Quirrel, she ran into him. He mustered the most awful sneer possible and gave her a look of utmost loathing. He didn't have to pretend much either. One look at her and his stomach spewed acid as it clenched with unbidden hatred.

Severus Snape would spend the rest of his life oscillating between inexplicable paternal anxiety and uncontainable hatred for Bella Potter.

Albus Dumbledore rubbed his eyes tiredly, as he walked out of the Hospital Wing. It had taken three days for Bella to open her eyes and he had never left her bedside all three days.

Her question rang in his ears. 'But why did Voldermort want to kill me in the first place?' He had looked at her, a child, and did what he knew was the right thing. He told her he would answer that later someday. Too young... far too young...

Albus clenched his fist when he realized how close he had come to losing her this time. Very, very close. Never again! he swore to himself. 'Not till she's ready'

Albus had a feeling it was an empty promise.

Lily winced at the sound of Moody's furious out-burst. She wasn't Fletcher's biggest fan, but right now she felt really sorry for him. Nobody should ever have to face Moody's fury.

Then again, trying to sell fake poisons to Lucius Malfoy under the disguise of a hag, right in the middle of Knockturn Alley, was an excessively stupid thing to do.

She glanced at Sirius who was smirking happily at the sight before them. She knew he was just happy to watch somebody else get screamed at for a change. Lily idly wondered if she should tip Moody off about who really snuck a multiplying jam donut in his robe pocket. Moody had raged for weeks about how his sneakoscope was jellied and nothing he did made the stickiness go.

Across the room, James too, had a gleeful expression as he surveyed the scene.

The screaming and Fletcher's attempts at defending himself came to an abrupt halt when Dumbledore walked in looking unusually stressed.

"Hestia Jones was murdered last night by Rabastan Lestrage."

The shocked silence that filled the room rang in Lily's years. Over the years they had gotten accustomed to losing members of the order. It was the inevitability of war. But Hestia had been one of their best fighters and a core order member. It was a big victory for the Death Eaters.

How are they getting stronger every single day? wondered Lily. What is it we're doing wrong?

Albus Dumbledore stared at his hands. He was losing faith.

There is still a chance...

Dumbledore squashed the thought down. But every now and then, he had an inkling that the prophecy that proclaimed the birth of a child who could vanquish Voldemort, would be realized.

Logically, he couldn't see how. Bella Potter and Neville Longbottom were both dead, murdered by Voldemort himself. But he knew somewhere deep down, it wasn't as much of a closed case as it looked to be.

Snape had fed the hope further by telling him about the strange incident involving the silver blade and Peter Pettigrew. Dumbledore immediately suspected that it could be...

But even Lord Voldemort was incapable of something that insane... wasn't he?

Dumbledore remembered Tom Riddle from school. He had watched the boy closely. As he thought about it, he realized that only Tom Riddle was capable of something this absurd.

Albus had rushed to Chile but try as hard as he could, he never found them. They probably never existed. They were a myth after all. The ritual must have been something else entirely. But what if it wasn't?

Albus hoped, somewhere in another universe, Tom Riddle was cowering and hiding because of a child he failed to kill.

Bella was slightly different from most witches and wizards - She could damn well take care of herself without a wand. Years of being held down and beaten to bloody pulp taught her to run fast. But Malcolm, Piers and Dudley hardly ever had the decency to fight fair. Then again, ganging up three on one in itself was a far cry from fair, but sneaking up behind someone and cornering them against a wall so that they couldn't run was taking the nastiness to a whole new level. The attacks became less frequent as they found Bella's punches becoming harder and accurate and her kicks sharper. The three bulky boys soon realized Bella was not to be trifled with, however docile she looked. Closer to her eleventh birthday it shifted to name calling, which hardly bothered Bella. Between Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia, all the hurtful and horrid things had been already said at-least once before. Dudley's less than average IQ could hardly be counted on to be more creative in the insult department. In short, Bella hadn't felt the urge to really beat the crap out of someone in a while.

But standing there, staring at Lucius Malfoy's twisted sneer as he heaped abuses on the Weasley family for everyone in Florish and Blotts to hear, while Ginny cringed and subconsciously huddled closer to her trying to protect herself from the onslaught, Bella felt a ringing in her ears.

Her eyes glowing, her lips tightened and her hair wild around her face, she stepped forward. Lucius Malfoy faltered ever so slightly. Arthur Weasley beat her to it.

The two grown men rolled on the floor, fists flying and legs crashing into the nearby shelves. Bella watched with grim satisfaction. Draco let out a strangled cry and tried to step in. He found himself being shoved against the shelf behind him. Looking up in horror, his eyes met Bella Potter's wild ones. "You want some action Malfoy?" she hissed, "Come on then. I'm all for it." Malfoy shook with alarm. The next moment he found himself on the floor, doubled up clutching his gut in pain.

Hagrid who had managed to separate the men, rushed to Bella and Draco and pulled the girl off the blonde. Bella struggled in his grip, snarling at Draco. "You stupid prat! Get up and fight! Or is it your so-called pureblood prerogative to hide behind a freaking wand and snivel like the brat you are!"

"Bella..." whispered Molly, helping Hagrid tug the girl away, her expression somewhere between alarm and amazement. The Weasley children, with the exception of Ron (who looked at her in resigned amusement) were astonished. Nobody had ever stood up for them like this before.

Bella was the adored and pitied orphan in the Weasley household, who were charmed by her gentle demeanour and politeness. They resolved to love her and give her a family. But at that moment, as she fumed and raved on their behalf at the Malfoys as Hagrid dragged her away, she won their lifelong unwavering loyalty and fierce devotion.

Arthur Weasley, for one, was pleased to finally have someone in the family who knew exactly how fellytones worked.

"Why didn't you tell us you're Parseltounge?" demanded Ron, as he pushed her into the armchair by the fire.

"A Parsel-what?"

"The ability to talk to snakes!" explained Hermione, looking stressed.

"Oh! That! I didn't realize it was something so spectacular that I needed to talk about it! I mean I've done it only once before when I accidentally set a boa on Dudley... er... Long story... and it sort of told me it had never been to Brazil... Hmmm... Hey can snakes cross oceans? I mean, it would've sucked if it escaped only to be held up by the shore, dipping its tail in the water and freaking out about the size of the Atlantic... Heh..." Bella stopped her reminiscing as it dawned on her that Ron and Hermione were looking positively horrified. "What exactly am I missing here...?"

"Bella... The ability to talk to snakes is a rare one. Very few, if any, wizards can do it." Hermione explained slowly. Bella continued to be puzzled. Isn't that supposed to be a good thing? Having rare talent?

Ron grimaced at her. "It was a speciality of Salazar Slytherin's. Hence the snake symbol."

"WHAT?" yelled Bella. "Are you... oh crap!" she groaned as she understood the ominous muttering that had filled the hall as Justin fled. "They can't possibly think..."

"Bells, it might just be possible you know." said Hermione tentatively. "He lived thousands of years ago and for all we know..."

"Don't finish that 'Mione." warned Ron who had been watching Bella's face change colours like a traffic signal.

The Sorting Hat's words played in her head over and over again. You would've done well in Slytherin...

Wow. Who knew being stupid took so much effort. Bella mused, as Ron and her, bumbled around trying to locate the Slytherin common room. Flint, a Slytherin prefect, had run into 'Crabbe' and 'Goyle' and had continued on his way two minutes later, muttering about Goyle suddenly getting sharp. Similar expressions were received from Blaise and Nott. I think I have new respect for Dudley...unless he really is THAT stupid and it's not an act to get under my skin then.

To their relief, and apprehension, Draco Malfoy beckoned to them. Where the hell is Hermione? Bella had a bad feeling that 'Mione's potion might've had something to do with her hiding in the cubicle. Or Bulstrode's keeping some really bizarre secret hidden under her robes and Hermione's having a cardiac arrest, upon its discovery.

Twenty minutes later, Ron and Bella ran back to the girls' bathroom, unable to digest that Malfoy had been a dead-end. Could it really be just me, then? Am I killing people without realizing it or something?

Bella stared after Ginny, who was practically running out of the hallway. "Ron..." murmured Bella. "I don't think she's okay."

"Wha..? Who? Ginny?" asked Ron distractedly looking up from telling Percy off for taking the éclair out of his plate.

"Yeah. She knows something, Ron. She's... well... I think it's serious." Bella had grown to like the girl very much during her stay in the Burrow, with whom she shared a room. Ginny had always had the habit of looking up to Bella. The hero worship had only gotten more intense after the fist-fight at Florish and Botts, so Bella was more than used to Ginny acting a bit bizarre around her. But for all her blushing and starry eyed behaviour around Bella, she had never ever looked so frightened and uneasy around her. Bella had a feeling something major was up.

Percy choked at her words, flushing a red dark as his hair.

"It's nothing Bells." Ron dismissed. "Probably just worked up 'cause Creevy stole the position of President in the Bella Potter fan club. Then again, his valentine was an absolute winner!"

Fred and George, who happened to walk in at that moment, took that to be their cue to start singing "Her eyes are as green as fresh pickled toad..."

Bella scowled at them, though she didn't put too much of her heart in it. It was nice to see Ron acting a bit like his former self. Since Hermione had been petrified and the following incident with Aragog and Hagrid's absence, he had taken to looking grim and troubled, often being downright overbearingly protective about her. One mate down, no hurry to see you in the Hospital Wing looking like a frozen statue of someone who had popped a bogey-flavoured Bertie's bean in their mouth Bells, he had said, when she snapped at him to stop tailing her. His pureblood status made him think that his presence around her would help fend it off. It also, for some reason, seemed to make him feel guilty, that he being pureblood seemed to make him safer than his friends.

'Which, is really stupid. He's Gryffindor and not in any way responsible for Slytherin's magic-haemophilia!' Then she remembered that she, the probable great-great-great-great-great granddaughter of Malfoy's hero and the person who stole the diary from her dorm, were also Gryffindors.

Stupid effing Hat.

"We're so alike Bella." crooned Riddle, making her want to punch something, preferably him. "We're both halfbloods, both raised by muggles, both of suffered a terrible childhood, we share Salazar Slytherin's special gift... we even look something alike." His sinister smile became more pronounced. "But you just survived by accident – a gift from your mudblood mother."

Bella felt something snap inside her. "Yes. My poor mudblood mother. Whereas yours died giving birth to you. Is she your first of thousand victims? Does that make you want to brag? Record first killing? Add to your list of Great achievements.' she spat at him.

She saw something stir in his eyes before his condescending expression fell back into place. I think I hit a nerve. And even he doesn't know I did.

Half an hour later, as she half supported, half dragged a sobbing Ginny while managing to hold on to the sword and diary in the other, she pondered Riddle's reaction. Was it pain she saw? Hatred? Riddle's capable of feelings? There's something new!

But then again, that comment had been below the belt, Bella-who-lived-and-was-an-orphan admitted to herself.

Am I actually empathizing with the nutcase who killed my parents?

"Professor, he said we were alike... and well... I don't... I dunno." Bella wished she had kept her mouth shut. Dumbledore continued to look at her gently, his eyes still twinkling. Bella looked at them and found the strength to go on. "I've spent the last one year listening to people present various hypothesis as to how I'm related to Slytherin. And I've always felt they were right. Even the Hat agreed and it was only due to my protesting did I get landed in Gryffindor." she said bluntly, too tired to explain in detail.

Dumbledore's eyes sparkled even more brightly. "Bella, who we are depends entirely on our choices and not what our genes dictate. I suggest you take a closer look at this sword."

Later that night, as she sat surrounded by Ron, Hermione, Neville, Ginny and Hagrid, she really understood the implications of Dumbledore's words.

Could I be him? Will I be everything he is one day if I chose to?

She looked around at the faces of her smiling friends and she felt comforted. It didn't matter what she was capable of and where she belonged. She would always choose to do the right thing, and that alone got her through the next few weeks at Hogwarts where a new theory was floated that she was the next dark lord and her strange powers had helped kill the monster in the chamber. She heard a small boy asking a 5th year if Dark Lords came from Gryffindor.

They come from dark places in your life, kid. She thought grimly. Mine came alive at age 1 where I was left to the darkness of a cupboard.

The question was, would her friends be enough to save her from herself?

"Well well well... If it isn't her highness, strolling in like she owns the ground she walks on. Please Vernon, make my day and tell me they beat her till she bleeds in that reform school she goes to." Aunt Marge sneered at Bella, a look worthy of Snape. Dudley grinned stupidly his eyes glinting in anticipation. Bella sighed inwardly.

There was a time when Aunt Marge could make her voluntarily run into her cupboard and weep all night long. Not any longer though. It had been many years since Bella had actually cried. Not that she ever did in front of everyone else. Bella learnt, as early as her fourth birthday that her tears only seemed to spur her family on to greater heights of cruelty. It had been almost four years since Bella cried at all, even in private. She still felt slighted and hurt. There were times when she still wanted to evaporate like ether under a ceiling fan. But the tears no longer came. Bella supposed that her tear ducts had run dry.

'Oh Margie,' Bella thought wryly. 'It doesn't matter how much you've sharpened your knives. I've seen worse since you last left. Bring it on you miserable old bitch.'

Looking back, Bella blamed herself for her complacency. Of course Aunt Marge could get her riled up. It made Bella realize that some old wounds never heal. They just lie pulsating under the surface, waiting to be torn out. The Dursleys, however much Bella hated to admit it, were her family and knew her best, before the stoic mask came on. They knew where to hit her to make it hurt the most.

She struggled with her heavy trunk, Marge's verbal shit playing over and over in her head, like a broken record, making her head throb.

Your sister was a hussy, Petunia! It'd be too much to hope that the girl is any better...A co-ed reform school? She'll come home pregnant by next summer – a new generation of no good, useless layabouts... well at-least you'll have a good reason to throw her out.

Come to think of it, never understood why you took her in the first place. Even they knew she was filth, like her father. Left her by the doormat, exactly where she belongs. Except the doormat's worthy of more respect.

Stop wasting food on her Vernon! No need to give her more sugar than she deserves... Ungrateful brat!

I hope you don't touch any of the things in your old room, Dudley. Don't want my Neffy-poo having contact with anything that mangy mutt might've touched.

That had been day one. And it only kept getting worse. Bella contemplated getting Marge and Voldemort together. They sure as hell were made for one another.

To give her Aunt and Uncle due credit, they seemed to squirm every time Marge started off, rather than join in. Bella got through the first night telling herself that maybe they really did care as against fear her. Well, one can dream, can't they? By the third day, Bella had made Marge shatter the wineglass in her hand and gotten Ripper's nose to bleed. She was afraid. She knew that she wouldn't last the week and it was only a matter of time before she did some major magical damage and have the entire Ministry of Magic on her head.

That night, an emotionally exhausted Bella gathered her clothes in a bag and snuck down in the dark to retrieve her trunk which was locked in her old cupboard. Thank you Fred and George!

Bella didn't really have a plan when she fled Privet Drive. She had just wanted out. Standing in the darkened street corner with a heavy trunk, broom, an empty owl cage and sparse amount of muggle and magic money, Bella supposed she ought to have given this more thought. The Weasleys were in Egypt and the Grangers in France. She couldn't run to Hagrid because then Dumbledore would know and she didn't want the drama that was her life to become public news. She already felt weak and ashamed. Since when did I become pathetic enough to start running away?

She held up her currently useless wand and sighed. She was stranded, with nowhere to go. Nobody awaited her anywhere and nobody would miss her back at the place she just left. Bella Potter, thirteen years old and unusual in every way, suddenly fought commonplace grief and loneliness. The tears still wouldn't come. What have I become?

The screaming wouldn't stop, now that the exhilaration of freedom had given way to anxiety. They were at his tail, he knew. One slip up, one wrong move, and it would be his end. He should have left for Hogwarts and hidden in the Forbidden Forest till he managed to lay

his hands on Peter. But he hadn't been able to resist. He had wanted to see her. Bella.

He had spent the first few days since his escape trying to figure out in whose care she was. He had been her last living legal guardian. Though James and Lily had officially marked Remus as guardian lest anything happen to Sirius, he highly doubted the Ministry would've allowed it. The Girl-Who-Lived would never be allowed to consort with a werewolf, irrespective of his relationship with her parents. Some things just don't change, he thought bitterly. James would've gone berserk if anybody dared to treat Moony badly. But James isn't here... only vestiges of what he stood for and far-too-real memories. And then he found out where Bella lived. As numb horror seeped through him, all Sirius could really think was Lily is going to throttle Dumbledore to his second death and make his after-life a veritable hell.

The street was dark and he padded along, hungry and tired. Just one glance he promised himself.

He stopped dead. By the small compound wall at the end of the street, a forlorn figure of a young girl sat, shoulders hunched. He could make out the shape of a trunk next to her. Sirius cautiously moved closer, set on crossing this odd entity unseen and continue making his way down to Privet Drive. As he edged closer, his keen dog nose picked up the girl's scent. It can't be... two feet from the girl, Sirius stopped dead, his heart beating painfully. Hidden in the shadows, Sirius felt something he hadn't felt in twelve years. Utter, unadulterated longing.

He edged around to get a clear view of her, ensuring he stayed hidden in the shadows. His canine jaws parted to release the slightest whimper as he took in her beautiful face.

I'm telling you Padfoot! We're going to have to fight the boys! Just look at her!

Heh! I know what you mean Prongsie... She looks NOTHING like you!

I know right?... Oi! What the ruddy hell was that supposed to mean? She's just like her old man!

Really? But I thought we just established that she's going to be good looking...

Et tu, Moony?

Sirius's eyes raked her form, hungrily. Bella. His beloved baby.

Her face was twisted in agony as she stared unseeingly at the sidewalk in front of her. As his euphoria settled in, the implication of the scene in front of him hit him like an oncoming train.

What the FUCk is my thirteen year old god-daughter doing outside alone at midnight by herself, looking like she's had a day from hell?

The old buried instinct to be at her side jolted awake like a live wire. He moved forward out of the shadows, unconsciously going near her. She looked up wearily and her eyes fell on him. They stared at each other for a long moment – Godfather and God-daughter. She suddenly pointed out her wand in front of her, unsure.

The silence of the night was broken by a loud screech, sudden bright lights and a bright purple monstrosity that literally appeared from nowhere. A stunned Bella stared in horror as the tires continued its rotation, heading towards her.

NO! Sirius leapt at her, the force of the contact sending them both crashing against the sidewalk, out of the bus's way.

A pimply young man jumped out from the bus, looking around.

The Knight Bus! Fuck!

Sirius jumped away from Bella and slunk back into the shadows. Just in time.

The conductor, on spotting her, started the usual introductory rant on the Knight Bus.

Bella tuned him out halfway, looking around for the giant black dog that was nowhere to be seen.

Stan Shunpike stopped mid-sentence when he realized that his audience's attention had drifted. "Er.. Whatcha lookin' fer?"

"Did you see that? The big black dog? It was here! Just a minute ago!" Sirius winced at her words. No Bella, he prayed silently. Don't bring this up again. Don't tell anybody... Please... Please...

Almost as if she heard his silent plea, she stopped mid-sentence. Shaking her head, she turned to Stan. "Anywhere you say? Well... I need to get to Diagon Alley."

Sirius watched as she boarded the bus, trunk and all, and wondered for the second time that night at the loneliness he saw etched in her face.

What the hell has been going on the last twelve years?

Bella dragged her trunk into The Leaky Cauldron as the Knight Bus vanished with a bang behind her. Her head was swimming with Stan Shunpike's rendition of 'The Evil Sirius Black', done with gleeful enthusiasm, punctuated with Ernie's requests to stop talking about the Azkaban Guards. Both of them had found an eager audience in 'Anna Stevens'.

The pub was gloomy and given that it was just around three in the morning, there was nobody in the parlour, save Tom the barman. He looked up as she entered, a curious expression on his face.

"Er... Sir," began Bella, "I was wondering if I could get a room for the night."

Tom stared at her keenly for a moment before his eyes widened. He stumbled out from behind the desk and seized her hand. "Miss Potter! What an absolute delight! A bit surprised of course but Welcome! And call me Tom."

"Um... Thank you." Bella flushed with embarrassment. Two years in the wizarding world as the Girl-Who-Lived had done nothing to dispel her dislike of being the centre of attention. She could never get used to it and moments like these made her excessively uncomfortable.

Bella had always been pushed to the background all her life, where the only attention she ever got was negative involving disapproving mutters from neighbours or Dudley's friends wanting to use her as a punching bag. Attention never meant anything good. Nowadays though, Dudley ignored her studiously when they were alone. He had tried to pick on her when his friends were around but much to his disgust, Piers and Malcolm had taken to acting gruff and shy around her, refusing to say a single mean thing. She once overheard Malcolm telling Dudley "Your cousin's a sweet lookin' one eh? We actually bullied that cutie when we were kids?" and Piers had piped up to add, "We actually hit a girl! How sad is that...Say, you think she's come with us to the park or someplace? We'll get her ice-cream or coffee or something... you know..."

Dudley had stared at them dumbstruck and spent dinner that night looking at her with utmost scrutiny, trying to see what Malcolm and Piers had.

"Well, Tom," continued Bella, hoping he wouldn't ask her too many questions, "is it possible to get a room then? I have work at Diagon Alley tomorrow and it's dark out..."

"Certainly Miss Potter!" Tom reached into a drawer and pulled out a key with a brass ring that had the number 11 stamped on it. "Right this way. And I'll get that trunk for you."

Bella stepped out of Gringotts, her pockets jingling with money. The line to interchange wizard money & muggle currency was long and she figured she might as well complete buying whatever she needed for school that year and return in the afternoon.

It was almost 4 in the afternoon by the time Bella decided to get back to the bank. She had spent a good amount of time ogling the Firebolt. She thanked the stars that she had a decent amount of self-restraint that kept her from immediately buying it. Her Nimbus 2000 was a brilliant broom and more importantly, she didn't want to find herself without money before she was done with school. Bella felt that the only thing she really owned apart from her parent's money was some pride and she had no intention of losing that by begging the Dursleys, or anybody else for that matter, for money.

The bags were heavy and she figured she'd make a quick detour to The Leaky Cauldron to drop them off before continuing to Gringotts. As soon as she stepped into the bar, however, she was greeted by a cry of relief. There, in front of her, stood Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, looking at her as though Merlin himself had walked in.

So much for staying low-key.

That night Bella stared at the ceiling of her room, replaying the conversation with Fudge.

Apparently they had been searching for her since early this morning when they realized she had run away from home. Why? She had asked. Fudge had stared at her incredulously. "Why? WHY? Good Lord, my girl! We were worried sick! Anything could've happened to you, what with you wandering off by yourself in the dead of the night! I thought... he... It doesn't matter. You're here and your safe and that's the important part."

He then made her promise to stay in Diagon Alley. Bella immediately protested saying she had no intention of doing that and she would stay outside in a muggle hotel till term started.

"What? Absolutely not! For God's sake Bella! Whatever for?"

To ensure I don't attract attention. Nobody knows the Girl-Who-Lived in the muggle world. She had wanted to say. But given that the Minister of Magic himself had come to track her down, clearly that plan had gone bust.

But isn't it unusual for the Minister himself to get involved in a simple case of an underage wizard running away from home? There's something more to this...

"Your family is worried about you, of course. A bit angry, but worried all the same. I expect they'll be pleased to have you back for the holidays."

The hell they will. Bella had wanted to snap at him and tell him that the only way she'd go back would be if someone killed her and dragged her corpse to Privet Drive. But as she stared at the Minister, his indulgent smile widening as he looked at her like an adoring grandfather, she decided to keep that to herself. Nobody needs to be treated to the story of my life, especially not well meaning almost-strangers.

The Weasleys had come down to Diagon Alley straight from Egypt on the last day of the summer vacation. And obviously, they knew all about her little running away episode, courtesy Arthur Weasley. Bella had to endure Molly tut-ing about how Bella looked like she hadn't eaten in years and her poorly concealed anger at the Dursleys. "Bringing it to a point where the poor girl has to stay by herself in Leaky Cauldron for two weeks... Atrocious to say the least... what kind of relatives... Monsters..." she had muttered furiously under her breath, as she carefully pushed Bella's hair out of her face and examined her anxiously, making Bella want to laugh. Ginny looked equally upset.

On the other hand Ron, Fred and George had laughed raucously and patted her on the back and asked her if she ran away so that nobody could hold her responsible for Dudley's murder.

"Go on, you can tell us. Where'd you hide the body?" Fred grinned.

That night after they all adjourned to their respective rooms, Ginny (who was camping out with Bella) carefully looked at her in the eye and asked softly, "All jokes apart, are you okay?"

Bella found herself unable to look away from the girl she was slowly starting to consider a baby sister she could never have. No, I'm not okay.

Instead she laughed boisterously and said, "Hell yeah! I actually ran away from the Dursleys and spent two weeks doing what I please, in a place I love! A childhood dream come true!" She flashed her infamous James Potter grin.

Ginny looked unconvinced and Bella figured she better get out before she blabbed something embarrassing and emotional. Jumping up, she said, "I'm going to go get myself some cocoa. I'll be right back alright?"

Bella wound her way down, decided on getting that hot cocoa for all it was worth. Then she heard Mr and Mrs Weasley arguing ferociously. Bella quickly made way to get out of there, not wanting to overhear any private argument, when she heard her name. What in the world..?

Well, at-least that explains why Fudge himself was leading the Bella Potter manhunt.

Bella gave Ron and Hermione the general gist of what Mr and Mrs Weasley had been discussing the previous night, as the three of them settled themselves in a compartment with a clearly exhausted Professor R J Lupin (his dilapidated trunk proclaimed), who had yet to open his eyes.

Much to Bella's dismay, both her friends seemed to be taking it much worse than she expected.

"How can you not be worried?" exclaimed Hermione. "If the guards actually heard him say "Bella... Hogwarts" over and over again in his sleep there can hardly be any doubt as to what he's after! He wants you dead!"

"As does every one of Voldemort's supporters, especially the ones convicted because I'm the reason they're in there." Bella replied impatiently. "My real question here is why everyone's freaking out. Even Voldemort himself didn't have the inclination to attack Hogwarts as long as Dumbledore remained headmaster. There is no way some two bit henchman like Black will even try getting near Hogwarts."

"Oh I don't know Bells..." Ron cut in slowly, looking as hassled as Hermione. "He did get out of Azkaban and that is pretty unheard of. If he can break out of there, he could just break into Hogwarts too... Speaking of which, we better be careful around Hogsmeade eh?"

Oh...Shit... Bella suddenly remembered the form, stuffed down the bottom of her bag, unsigned.

Next time, I think I'll just force Uncle Vernon into signing by holding him at wand point rather than cut stupid deals where I have no way of keeping my end of the bargain.

"Why are we slowing down already?" Bella glanced at Dudley's old plastic Mickey Mouse wrist watch wound around her left wrist and frowned (It had been one of the first things she found and repaired when she had first moved into his second room. Typically, nobody noticed because nobody remembered he even owned something like that, like pretty much everything else he had thrown a tantrum for and discarded within a day of obtaining).

Neville, who had run into the compartment sometime in the afternoon while being chased down by Malfoy and his cronies, squinted out into the dark "Dunno... Can't see a thing. You don't think the train's broken down do you?"

Ron frowned at the window as he strained to look over Professor Lupin's head.

Without warning, all the lights in the train went out, plunging them all into pitch black darkness resonant with the view outside of the train window.

"Hey! Put the light back on!"

"Stop screaming in my ear Ron! I didn't switch it off..."

"I think all the lights are out... Corridor's dark too..."

"What's going on? I think the train really has broken down... Maybe the electric line has been cut off..."

"The elaktree what?"

"It's... Oh never mind. I forgot. Magical train...'Mione can you see anything outside?"

"No go, Bells... Some dark shapes but can't make out a thing..."

And the screaming began. Horror struck, shrill screaming all through the corridor.

Hermione grabbed Bella's hand and squeezed tight. "What's happening?" she asked fearfully.

Bella stood up, her wand held out in front of her. "Something's gone wrong. I'm going out to see!"

"No!" a hoarse voice cried out. Professor Lupin had finally woken up. "Lumos!"

The compartment was lit by the faint light from his wand-tip. His tired grey eyes glanced around wearily. Before he could say another word, the compartment door slid open. A cloaked figure stood at the doorway, its face hidden by the hood. Bella stared at its hand which was placed against the door frame – scabbed and dead. The creature looked around slowly and then a rattling sound was heard. The creature was taking a deep breath, the air whistling and rattling as it went through its empty chest. And Bella's world came to an end.

A woman screamed in her ear. Pleading... Desperate sobbing... Shouting... Bella tried to find her way out of the darkness... Who was the screaming woman? She had to help her...

And unbidden, images flashed through her head. A furious Uncle Vernon, advancing on her his hands raised, promising her he'd beat her till her skin was permanently blue... Aunt Petunia snarling at her at the hospital about incurring a medical bill, her broken ribs aching as Dudley stood sanctimoniously in the corner, as if he had nothing

to do with it... Her neighbour Mr Harrows leering at her that night she returned late from the library, telling her she could play with his 'toy' and asking her where she was running, after-all her Aunt and Uncle would never believe her... Uncle Vernon locking in the cupboard for three days straight for socking said Mr Harrows in the gut... She was huddled in the dark corner of her cupboard as Dudley stood outside, locking her in and feeding her images from horror movies...

Every emotion Bella kept bottled through the years - hurt, fear, grief, misery and loneliness tore at her heart... Voices in her head admonished her, told her nobody loved her, nobody cared, she was an orphan... Alone...

Bella screamed and thrashed about. "Stop... Stop it..." she sobbed. Flashing green lights blinded her, a high, cold laugh sounded in her ear. "STOP! Make it stop!" she cried out.

And it did stop. Bella was vaguely aware that the train was moving and the lights were back on. She struggled to open her eyes but they did seem open. Why is it so blurry? Who screamed? What's going on?

And Bella realized, to her utmost horror, her eyes were swimming with tears. She was shaking and on her knees, her hands threaded through her hair, clutching it. She blinked and was aware that someone was gripping her shoulders tightly. Professor R J Lupin was kneeling on the ground facing her, his face ashen, eyes wide and terrified as he peered at her. "Bella? Bella are you alright?" his hoarse whisper broke through her haziness. She looked around her and the stricken faces of her friends stared down at her. Ron had his hands on her shoulders, his face white and worry evident in his eyes. Hermione stood next to him, her hands over her mouth, looking at her with tear-filled eyes. Neville just stood in the corner, gazing at her as if he'd never seen her before.

She stared at Professor Lupin, who had her wrists manacled within his hands and seemed to be shaking as much as her. "What was that... that thing?" What did it do to me?" she asked, her voice a faint whisper. Lupin swallowed hard. "Dementors. They guard Azkaban." He told her quietly. She continued to look at him, not really seeing him.

Lupin hauled her up, his arms around her, supporting her. He gently pushed her down on the seat. Ron immediately sat next to her, wrapping his arms around her, looking grim. Hermione followed suit, on her other side. Lupin rummaged through his pockets and drew out a bar of chocolate. Wordlessly, broke it into four large quarters and handed each of them one piece.

"Eat it. It'll help." he said. "I'm going up front to talk to the driver and check when we'll arrive at Hogwarts."

The silence continued to permeate the moments following Professor Lupin's departure.

Bella trailed out of their first DADA class, doing her best to listen to Ron's enthusiastic recount of his battle with the Boggart-Aragog. He thinks I'm weak, incapable. That's why he didn't let me face the Boggart. Bella felt bitter and angry, constantly on the edge after the night she fell to pieces on the train. The Dementor had broken through her strong facade and she now had to deal with everybody treating her cautiously. The pity in their eyes drove her wild. Bella never really got into details about her home life, just a few bare hints that she didn't get along with the Dursleys. Ron had gotten a better idea when he came to rescue Bella from her barricaded room in Mr Weasley's flying car the previous summer, but she had managed to pass it off as an unusually vicious temper tantrum from her Uncle for losing a good deal. But now, they knew. And apparently, so did most of the school. Bella suppressed the urge to hex Professor Flitwick who gave her an over-bright smile as he passed them. I don't want your fucking pity! I WILL HEX YOU ALL TO OBLIVION AND LET'S SEE WHO NEEDS TO BE PITIED THEN! she wanted to holler for the whole school to hear.

The worst of the lot was undeniably Professor Lupin. His eyes seemed to shimmer with pain and anxiety whenever they fell on her. There was an unspoken plea whenever he addressed her, like he wanted her to come to him, talk to him. Bella would have none of it. She was polite to him, but kept her distance. She was still struggling to rebuild the walls and she didn't want the man's sympathy.

To make matters worse, the first Hogsmeade trip was scheduled for the coming weekend and Bella couldn't go because she had forgotten to get her form signed in the fiasco over the summer. Ron was trying to persuade her to ask McGonagall to make an exception

while Hermione was torn between agreeing with Ron and thinking that Bella would be safer in the castle, out of Sirius Black's reach. Bella put an end to the discussion by saying she wasn't going to ask anybody for anything and she couldn't care less that she had to spend the Saturday in the common room. "I can get my homework done. What with all the Quidditch practice Oliver's been putting us through; I am never going to pass my third year, especially Potions."

Oddly enough, Potions turned out to be the only class Bella hadn't minded so far because Snape hadn't bothered to tip-toe past her delicately or treat her like a chronically ill patient. He had wasted no time in calling her all sorts of names, telling her to deflate her head, sneering at her and passing snide comments. Bella was glad that at least somebody was acting normal.

Bella had been looking forward to Hagrid's class but even that had fallen apart after the Malfoy-Buckbeak disaster. Now a highly diminished Hagrid had settled on teaching them about Flobberworms. Bella was worried that Malfoy was still lying in the hospital Wing, moaning about his hand and making a big fuss. She knew it was only putting Hagrid in deeper trouble. On the other hand, I don't have to see his stupid face. Malfoy had been particularly infuriating after the Dementor incident. Not that he ever dared to openly pick a fight with her – the showdown at Florish and Botts was still fresh in his memory; But that never stopped him for acting like a dick when he was a safe distance from her, out of her punching range.

Then there was Trelawney, her Divination Professor, who seemed to think Bella's sole purpose of existence was to eventually die a painful, drawn out death as per her predictions. Hermione seemed to have very little patience with her, as did Bella. But she figured Divination would be easier to get through as compared to Arithmancy or Runes. So she put up with it and sniggered through the class with Ron while Hermione muttered about what a waste of time Divination was. Bella often suggested that she drop the class. Given that she was taking every other class, it would cut down her load a lot. But Hermione had refused. Ron kept trying to push her into telling them how she managed to attend all the classes, (these probing sessions usually ended with Hermione telling him to mind his own business and stalking off to the library) but Bella didn't ask. She figured if Hermione wanted to tell them, she would and dropped the matter after the very first round.

Bella stood by the Great Hall entrance waving Ron and Hermione off as they made their way out to Hogmeade. Bella would never admit it, but she felt at a loss as she watched them go. She had never spent day alone at Hogwarts without either of them. She turned around to head back to the common room when she ran headlong into Professor Lupin. Both of them stared at each other for a whole minute, before he broke into one of his gentle smiles. "Bella! Spending the day inside I see. Well, it so happens that I'm doing the same. Why don't you come with me to my office? I can get you some tea."

Bella, who still felt the loneliness tugging at her heart, broke her own rules and said yes. Both of them walked silently to his office in the third floor. Bella liked the man. He was a fantastic teacher and the whole episode with Snape-Boggart had appealed to her sense of humour. She found his presence comforting.

Remus Lupin glanced at the girl by his side and wondered, for the millionth time in weeks, why her eyes, (so much like Lily's) didn't have the bright sparkle as her mother's or even her own infant-hood. There was another dimmer light – a muted glow. Her eyes were darker, more guarded. His fists clenched inside his robe pockets. You did this Sirius... I'm just glad James died and never had to face your betrayal or live to see what his daughter has become. I, on the other hand, did live through all this. And I will make you pay if it's the last thing I do.

The wind continued to howl outside, making the windows rattle. The weather matched Bella's mood, as she swung her bag over her shoulders and moved with the rest of the class to the exit.

"Just a minute, Bella." Professor Lupin called out. Bella cringed but moved aside and waited for her classmates to leave. She looked anywhere but at him as she approached his desk. Just as she expected, Lupin looked at her sympathetically. "I heard about the match against Hufflepuff. I'm so sorry..."

Bella shrugged and tried to look as non-committal as possible. "It's alright professor. Everybody has a bad day."

Lupin looked at her shrewdly. "Your first such bad day?"

Bella couldn't stop the scowl that spread across her face. "I've never lost a match before. So yeah. Well whatever... It happens." Lupin's expression had too much understanding for her liking. It was as though he knew just how much the defeat had aggravated her. "Don't worry. Dumbledore will ensure the Dementors won't appear at the next match."

Bella tried not to think about how she had gone to pieces hundred feet up in the air. She hadn't stopped shaking or pleading with her inner demons till Dumbledore got her out of the pitch. She had spent the rest of the weekend barricading herself in the Hospital Wing, refusing to see anyone. Apart from the fact that she couldn't handle any more sympathy or face her teammates after losing the match, she had figured out what the screaming in the background was.

Bella lay tormented by the ghost of her pleading mother, in her last few living moments, trying to bargain for her daughter's life. She hated them. She hated the Dementors. They were her personal apocalypse. And she hated them for breaking her. And I hate Sirius fucking Black. This is all his doing. He had just had to break out now didn't he?

She looked up at Lupin with a frown. Before she could stop herself, she blurted out "I'm not weak or something, alright? It's just that... they do something to me. I'm doing my best to fight them but it's damn hard... All that screaming, the images..." she broke off, glaring at the board behind him, missing Lupin's agonized expression.

"Bella... What they do to you is not something to be ashamed of. Quite the contrary, it is a testimony of what you have endured. It's not the weak and the coddled who are badly affected by them. It is the strong-willed survivors who suffer at the hands of a Dementor. They have the worst memories and are most haunted. I... I wish it weren't so Bella, but you're one of those people."

Bella felt grateful for his words. It salvaged some of her pride and made her feel less useless. She felt her respect for the man go up and plunged on recklessly, giving in to the urge to talk to somebody. "I hear her... My Mum. She was begging for my life... Voldemort... that bastard's just laughing..."

Lupin reached out suddenly and gripped her shoulders tightly. He looked as haunted as she felt.

"How the hell did he do it? Sirius Black? How the hell did he survive this for twelve damned years before breaking out?"

Lupin's expression hardened. "Oh I suppose there wasn't much of a conscience left in him by the time he was sent in." came his bitter reply.

Bella remained silent. She had a feeling that she might've hit something very close to the heart and she knew better than to ask. However, "Can you help me fight them Professor? The Dementors?"

Lupin looked at her shrewdly. "I don't know Bella. It's very complex, not something a thirteen year old can accomplish."

"Maybe. But I would like to learn anyway. Even if I don't master it, at least I can try fighting them. I don't want to be so vulnerable. I want a fighting chance." Her eyes flashed ferociously.

Remus Lupin stared at her, stunned by how much she sounded like James at that moment. "Alright." He sighed.

He was rewarded with a lopsided, mischievous grin – and Remus Lupin was 12 years old again with James Potter by his side.

Bella groaned and rubbed her temples. The last round with the Boggart-Dementor had been particularly horrible. Her head throbbed and her father's panicked voice continued playing in her head like a

soundtrack on continuous replay. Hullo Dad, she thought glumly, Welcome to the pity party in my head. Make yourself comfortable.

Lupin hovered over her anxiously. He had been astonished by her ability to produce the faint shadow of a patronus. She had already crossed the average expected ability of a witch her age. But he could see that the interactions with the Dementors were taking a toll on her. More often than not, she would have to be shaken out of her personal hell, her eyes wide and stricken.

But he knew there was no point in talking her out of it. She was just as bull-headed as her father. He silently handed her a piece of chocolate and waited till she was ready.

"A... Firebolt?" Ron and her stared at the unsigned present with stunned disbelief. "Wha...? Bella what the hell?"

"I dunno..." Bella was stumped. Who in the world spent a fortune to send her an anonymous gift?

"We should ride it!" Ron cried hoarsely! "Let's go!"

"No!" Hermione cried out, staring at the broom as though it was a time bomb. "Bella it could be dangerous!"

"Well to someone with your riding abilities, it would be." an irate Ron replied. "Lets go!"

"It could be from Black." came Hermione's ominous reply.

The resulting argument had finally ended with Professor McGonagall (who happened to come into the common room to check on a hexed banister railing) confiscating it and telling Bella that Hermione was absolutely right.

Ron had been furious with Hermione but Bella held her peace. The loss of the Firebolt had bummed her out, but she could see Hermione's point of view. Nobody who came in the small list of people who knew and liked her enough to do this had the financial resources for it. Ron had walked off, calling them both idiots. Oliver literally spat out a mouthful of his dinner when he heard that his Seeker had received and lost a Firebolt in less than an hour. He had

shouted himself hoarse and run off to find McGonagall to convince her to return the broom.

"I wish him all the best." Bella said, going back to her dinner. "Hope he controls his over-excitement or she might curse him." It so happened that he hadn't and though McGonagall hadn't cursed him, she did set him detention for his 'lack of humanitarian concern' for his Seeker and for 'being a callous, lumbering moron'.

"Like that'll stop him. He'll be plotting of ways to sneak out the Firebolt from McGonagall's office and he'll already have a full charted out plan as to how he'll make up for the training session he missed during the detention." Angelina said, rolling her eyes as Fred and George laughed their heads off as they tried to picture McGonagall calling Oliver a moron.

"Don't worry Bells, you'll get it back. It's been a while since Black has been sighted and with every passing day, security is getting lax." Ron assured her. Hermione had muttered something about how he could do with the same detention as Oliver.

She had already been furious with Bella sneaking off to Hogsmeade using the Marauder's Map. Fred and George had given it to her before the second scheduled trip because her moping was apparently grating on their nerves. ("We're missing the sarcastic crap you come up with when you make a sorry attempt at humour," Fred had told her. "Go get some chocolate from Honeydukes and we better not see you sulk or we'll set a Dementor on you ourselves." George added).

Bella was glad she had listened to them. The day trip had been fantastic and she loosened up for the first time since she ran away from the Dursleys in the summer. She was already looking forward to returning and having more Butterbeer. Her last trip had been cut short by McGonagall, Fudge, Flitwick and Hagrid entering the pub. Ron, Hermione and her ran to the exit to avoid being seen and made their way to Zonko's instead.

"Bella!" a voice called out, breaking her out of her rapturous admiration of the Firebolt that had just been returned to her. Cedric Diggory was walking up to her, his handsome face lit up by a smile.

"Hullo Cedric." Bella had always liked the Hufflepuff Seeker. He was just so unbelievably nice it made her think sugar ran in his veins. How can someone be so just and fair all the time?

"Congrats on the Firebolt! Can I see it?"

"Sure!" Bella tugged it out of a very reluctant Fred Weasley's hands and handed it to him. Fred just scowled at Cedric, still peeved at him for what had happened during the last match. Bella rolled her eyes. For God's sake... I lost the match because of Dementors. They won fair and square! She had been sufficiently impressed when she found out that Cedric had tried to ask for a re-match. Too nice. Just not humanly possible.

Cedric handed her the broom back and both of them started up on some small talk. Bella liked having him around. He was not really a friend or someone in any way related to her day-to-day madness. He was just an acquaintance. He was a peaceful entity and she felt light and cheery around him. When they talked, it was about mundane everyday things like the weather, making fun of some of the professors or Quidditch. She felt like a normal person around him, not like the Girl-Who-Lived, with all its associated expectations. Both of them had been talking for a full ten minutes before a loud throat clearing piece staged by the boys in the Gryffindor team broke her out of her happy bubble. Sighing at them, Bella waved to Cedric and left with her team. "He is the enemy!" hissed Oliver. "He wants to know our tactics! Stop being pally with him Bella!"

"Are you insane Oliver?" Angelina, Katie and Alicia looked equally incredulous.

"If we lose to Ravenclaw it'll put Hufflepuff on top of the table." snapped Oliver.

Bella strongly suspected this had more to do with the way Alicia was staring at Cedric than Quidditch itself. Well at-least I know Oliver is capable of thinking outside Quidditch. Shocker.

As it turned out, they did win the Ravenclaw match. And the cherry on the cake had been Malfoy's stupid attempt at posing as a Dementor to freak Bella out. He had been listening with a haughty expression as McGonagall gave him an ear-ful. However, his face lost colour as he spotted Bella, Fred and George over McGonagall's

shoulder, all three of them smirking and the looks on their faces promising hell. He ran as fast as he could, with Flint and Crabbe at his heels as they tried to lose themselves in the Slytherin crowd, only to be held up by Seamus, Dean and Ron. It was an indication of how furious McGonagall was when she didn't stop them from shoving the three of them around and she even told Snape to do something about his own students before doling out detention to the Gryffindors. This meant Bella was further bullied by him during Potions, but all in all, it was totally worth it.

"A toast! To Gryffindor's victory!" Remus Lupin raised his bottle of Butterbeer and clinked it with Bella's, looking ten years younger, his smile radiant.

"I thought teachers weren't supposed to take sides?" teased Bella.

"Theoretically. But once a Gryffindor, always a Gryffindor!"

"Here here!"

Underneath all the hysteria and cheer, darkness loomed in the form of worry over Buckbeak. Hagrid was tipping into the lowest depths and the three of them were sneaking out almost everyday to comfort him. He had even stopped telling Bella off for visiting him after dark. They tried their hardest to give Hagrid a fighting chance at the hearing. But to nobody's surprise, Buckbeak had lost. Half-heartedly, they tried to put together a case for the appeal. But Bella knew that between Hagrid's emotional blubbering and Lucius Malfoy's influence over the jury, Buckbeak stood positively no chance. But it seemed to help Hagrid's shattered peace of mind so they dutifully showed up at his hut every evening.

The match with Slytherin culminated in victory for the lions after a month-long display of utterly crazed behaviour from both houses. Hexes flew over heads and the Hospital Wing was flooded with people with their wands jammed up their noses or covered in painful boils.

Everybody was out for blood and for the first time, the Gryffindors didn't wait till they were attacked first. Bella had raised their chances of actually winning for the first time since Charlie Weasley had left and the last two years of expectations had been dashed by her injury and the Chamber of Secrets disaster.

The game was dirty and vicious. Bella was the most targeted by the Slytherin team because of her slender build and the fact that she had convinced Oliver to keep Fred and George stuck to the chasers, to protect them from the Slytherin onslaught. Left unprotected, she was the receiving end of Flint, Bole and Malfoy's so called 'offense-as-defence' strategy and spent most of the time ducking their blows or their less than subtle attempts to grope her as they tailed her. Bella promised herself she would kick them in the groin as soon as the match was over, which, thankfully for the largely helpless audience, happened in a matter of two hours.

The Gryffindor chasers were too good to be pulled down by Slytherin and they were comfortably in the lead at 90-10. But their defeat to Hufflepuff had made it mandatory for them to 60 points ahead to win the cup. The Gryffindor team was losing their concentration, sidetracked by their outrage at the opposing team's attack on Bella.

"They should tighten the fucking sexual harassment rules in the fucking game!" bellowed Fred as he beat a bludger that headed towards Angelina, at the same time Bella had to swerve sharply and almost hit George as she dodged Bole's hand.

"I'd rather they didn't." seethed Bella, as she turned abruptly so that the back of her broom whacked Malfoy on his abdomen. "I won't be able to retaliate sufficiently, then."

The match wore on, injuries increasing. Lupin and McGonagall watched furiously from the sidelines. Even Snape looked mildly horrified. The rest of the teachers were decided on stopping the match if the Slytherin team employed one more of their unacceptable tactics.

Thankfully, Bella spotted the snitch at the base of one of the Slytherin posts and dived. Malfoy was too far away and as soon as Flint realized what was going on, he roared at the rest of the team to attack. Bella rushed head-long towards the ground, singularly focused on the snitch and failing to notice six burly Slytherin players rush at her from all sides.

Bella's hand closed around the snitch, the same time all six players crashed into her. The victorious yells were overtaken by screams of

outrage as the Gryffindor team rushed to the huddled mess to rescue their seeker.

The bleeding Gryffindor team, more than half of them sporting some major broken limb or cracked bones, grinned like maniacs as they raised the cup over their head and whooped like wild animals.

The victory was sealed by the entire Slytherin team having to face the staff's fury. All of them were given a months' worth of detention. As Bella laughed her head off, on someone's shoulders, cup in hand, she spotted a small shadow of movement at the edge of the pitch, away from the crowd. A big black dog stood, watching the scene. The dog's eyes met hers and Bella felt the laughter catch in her bruised throat. It was the same dog that had pushed her out of the Knight Bus's way at Magnolia Crescent. The dog's steel blue eyes met hers and she gave the slightest tilt of her head, an acknowledgement. The dog bared its teeth, not menacingly, but almost a grin and turned and bounded away towards the Forbidden forest. Bella watched it go, wondering why she never told anybody about the dog. She just knew she never would and this surprised her. Her curiosity had gotten her into trouble more often than she could remember and yet, this once, she felt no inclination to go after the dog. She just felt at peace.

Nobody noticed the whole exchange, which transpired in a matter of seconds. Except for Remus Lupin, who looked at Bella and the path down which the dog had disappeared, looking as though he had been punched in the gut by a fist of steel.

"Hold Scabbers for me will you? He's going completely mental!" whispered Ron, as the three of them hurried away, under the Invisibility cloak, Fudge's voice emanating from Hagrid's hut.

"Quick!" moaned Hermione. "I don't want to know..."

Bella took Scabbers from Ron and was promptly bitten by the squealing rat. "Ouch! Calm down Scabbers! What's gotten into you?"

The rat had been acting bizarre all through the year and was often found hiding under Ron's bed. It tended to get hysterical if Ron tried to take him out. They had initially supposed it was a post-Egypt syndrome, but almost a year later, the creature's behaviour had gotten more and more erratic. It had been snoozing in Ron's coat pocket and upon finding itself outdoors, as they hurried to Hagrid's hut, it had gone berserk.

"Move! Move!" hissed Hermione, who had her hands clamped over her ears, determined to block out any sound that might hint at Buckbeak's execution.

They were rapidly approaching the Whomping Willow when suddenly Bella froze in her tracks. In front of them, against the evening shadows, stood the dog.

"Bella what ... Oh my God!" Hermione broke off as she stared at the huge hound in front of them. Ron hissed in alarm and started to back off. "Bella... The Grim!"

"Ron... Shut up... It... He... won't hurt us." Bella murmured as the dog slowly edged its way towards them.

All three of them watched the dog, which stopped a few feet in front of them, its eyes on Bella.

Ron and Hermione tensed up on either side of her. Her own nerves felt taut and she was ready to spring when...

"Scabbers!" The rat had gone dead silent when the dog appeared and now suddenly bit down on Bella's hand - Hard. She dropped it in surprise. Ron jumped at her cry and he caught the escaping rat

before it hit the ground. The dog, which had taken to standing silently, let out a ferocious growl and leapt at them.

Its jaws clamped around Ron's arm and tugged at it. "Ron!" screamed Hermione. Bella whipped out her wand but before she could even point it at the dog, it had dragged Ron towards the Whomping Willow. Its paw jammed against the knot at its base and the branches stood still as death. The dog rushed into the opening at the bottom of the tree, still dragging a yelling Ron with it.

"After it!" yelled Bella as she and Hermione ran into the opening and got through just as the tree came back to life again.

"That dog... Bella what's happening?" panted Hermione, as the struggled to go through the stumpy tunnel as fast as possible, both silently praying that Ron was alright.

"Dunno... It's saved me before... The night I ran from the Dursleys... Seen it by the edge of the Forbidden Forest... Think it was watching me..."

"Watching you?" Hermione repeated shrilly, looking sickened and tense.

The tunnel seemed to open out to a dimly lit room. The furniture was ripped and shredded, and it looked like nobody had been in there for years. Ron lay gasping for breath, against one of the bed posts. His eyes were unfocussed. Both the girls ran to him.

"Ron! Oi! You okay? Are you hurt?" Bella shook him by the shoulders roughly when he continued to stare blankly at something behind her.

"Ron?" Hermione whispered uncertainly.

"Bella..." he rasped out. "It's him... the dog... All along... right here..."

"What?" hissed Bella, panicking. What the hell's happened to him? We need to get him back to the castle and Madame Pomfrey immediately. Hermione looked at her anxiously. "What is he saying?"

"Sirius Black!" choked out Ron. "The dog, Bella! It's Black!"

"Expelliarmus." A quite, broken voice came from behind. Hermione and Bella's wand flew out of their hands.

They slowly turned around, Ron's words finally sinking in. There, by the door leading to another room, stood a tall, ragged looking man. His longish filthy hair hung around his face and he looked emaciated, like an animated skeleton from a horror movie. His face was pale and largely expressionless. Only his eyes stood out. Gray-blue eyes burned like a glass through which one could see the fires of hell lit behind them. They darted between Scabbers and Bella, before finally coming to a rest on the latter. Bella stared back, unable to look away from the intensity of his gaze.

So this is the face of my death.

Bella was surprised at her own lack of fear. She looked at him steadily, curious. Finally she broke the silence.

"You saved me back in the summer. That's a bit odd considering you went through a lot of trouble to try and kill me..." she said, her tone mild. Behind her, Ron and Hermione exchanged a startled glance.

Something stirred in his eyes. "I'm not here to kill you..." his voice was hoarse from lack of use.

"No?" Bella raised her eyebrows. "I've been told otherwise. But back to the point, it's me you want. Let my friends go. I know a conscience is not your biggest asset, but they're innocent and I don't see why they should die at your hands just because they happen to be around me tonight."

Black's mouth tightened at her words. Ron snarled, "The hell he'll let us go! And even if he does, we're not moving." He faced Black, his expression cold and determined. Hermione's face mirrored his, as she stood straight next to Bella, one hand on Ron's shoulder. "You'll have to kill us too, if you're going to kill her."

"A package deal." agreed Hermione.

"Shut up! Both of you." Bella said sharply. Turning to Black, "Look, you can let them go and this can be a lot less of a mess than it will be if you make me fight you."

Black looked at them blankly and said. "Only one dies tonight."

Bella smiled sardonically. "Did Azkaban knock some humanity into you? You weren't so keen on keeping the numbers down when you murdered those twelve muggles all those years ago."

Black cocked an eyebrow at her, looking faintly amused. "That's a lot of courage from an unarmed teenage witch. How do you intend to fight me? Shouldn't you be... Oh, I don't know... Begging for mercy?" His bitter tone threw Bella off momentarily.

She sneered at him, feeling very Draco Malfoy-ish as she did. "I don't beg, especially at the hands of Voldemort's stooge. I'd rather die, you sick bastard. But I wouldn't expect you to understand that."

Black eyes seem to mist over. "Just like James..." he said so softly that Bella had to strain to hear the words.

Her blood ran cold. "What did you say?"

"Your father. You're like him. That's the sort of thing he would've said. James would've been so proud of you... thoroughly pissed that you thoughtlessly put yourself in danger but nevertheless..."

Bella's calm gave way to fury. "Shut the fuck up!" she snarled. "Don't you dare talk about my Dad. You have no business even saying his name, you psychopath. I will fucking kill you with my own bare hands! Your megalomaniac master murdered him and you think you have the right to talk about him to me?" Hermione and Ron tightened their grip on her jacket to keep her from launching at him.

"You don't know even half of it Bella." A quiet, strained voice sounded at the tunnel entrance.

Remus Lupin slowly walked forward, his eyes scanning the three of them, his wand trained on Black. After ascertaining that none of them were seriously injured, he turned his full attention to Black, his eyes hardening as he surveyed the man. "Irony that you should've chosen this place to finish what you started, Sirius."

He turned to Bella, looking grim. "I've been following you, keeping a close watch on you since the match against Slytherin. That was the day I realized you had already run into Sirius Black in his Animagi form and you clearly had no idea who the dog really was. I knew, you would come to see Hagrid in the evening before Buckbeak's execution... It would be the perfect time for him to strike. I made it to the grounds just in time to see you and Hermione disappear into the tunnel by the Whomping Willow."

Black's face had taken on a disbelieving expression as Remus walked in. A sense of urgency stole into his impassive demeanour. "It wasn't me, Remus. We switched."

Remus frowned at him. "You really think your desperate stories will save you? I'm not James, Sirius, to mindlessly humour you."

Black gestured towards Ron. "He's right here."

Hermione and Bella looked at Ron, who stared back, completely flummoxed.

"Professor Lupin..." Bella began, trying to put some sense back in the conversation, but Remus was staring wide-eyed at Scabbers, who was squealing and struggling in Ron's death grip. He swayed slightly on the spot, looking as though he had watched someone be sick.

"How... But how?" he spun around to stare at Black. "Unless... You thought I was the spy and switched without telling me... And he faked ... Oh Lord!" Black's lips twisted into a misery-laden smile.

Remus spun on his heel and marched towards Ron, his face uncharacteristically wild. Bella immediately stood in front of him, pushing Hermione behind her too, shielding both of them from the madness she couldn't comprehend. "I don't know what's going on," she said coldly. "But if you take one more step forward, you will be very sorry." Remus stopped dead, looking aghast. "Bella, you don't understand... That rat... He's an Animagus. He's Peter Pettigrew!"

Ron snorted behind her and Bella felt her frustration rise. "I told you not to trust him Bella," whispered Ron harshly. "Damn werewolf!"

A stunned silence rang through the room. "You know? How?" croaked Remus.

"We worked it out after Professor Snape set us that essay on Werewolves." Hermione ventured quietly. "You always fall ill on full moon nights and your Boggart is the moon."

"Ron kept telling us to be careful," added Bella, her voice as harsh as Ron's. "We told him to stuff it and keep his wizarding prejudices to himself. But he was right wasn't he? You're in cahoots with Black! I trusted you... I opened up to you... I looked up to you..." she broke off, unable to stomach the betrayal.

Remus looked at her in dismay. "Bella, Please... You have to believe me... The rat... Peter... You don't understand..."

"Understand what?" snarled Bella, finally losing her patience. "That you've lost your mind? Black has twelve years in Azkaban as an excuse. What's yours? I said STAY BACK!"

"I repeat - you're unharmed." Black spoke up, calmly, looking almost amused. "Empty threat, Bella."

"Stop it, Sirius." Remus whispered. "She needs to know the truth. You... We...I owe her that."

"Later, Remus. We can explain everything later." Black replied coldly.

"No." Remus looked at Bella brokenly. "Now, Sirius."

Black looked at him, at Bella and sighed. Turning to the three of them he said, "What do you know about the Fidelius Charm?"

"Further back, Sirius. She knows nothing at all."

Black looked even more grim, something Bella didn't think could be possible two minutes ago. "Nothing? WHY is that? Didn't you tell her? Didn't ANYBODY tell her?" he demanded.

Remus shook his head and turned to her. "It all, if you really want to go to the very beginning, starts with me getting bitten..."

The Whomping Willow at the end of the tunnel continued making a racket. The occupants of the room were a combination of flustered, tired and jubilant. Remus conjured iron shackles and bound Peter. Sirius managed to fix Ron's leg temporarily. Glancing out of the window, he said, "Good thing it's not a full moon night Moony. But we're getting there eh?"

Remus nodded, looking exhausted. "Two days to go."

Ron, Hermione and Bella just looked at one another silently, feeling bemused. Ron looked shaken to the core. Well I would be a mess too, if I found out Hedwig was actually a dead man who had gone incognito as my pet and killed dozens of people to fabricate a lie which landed an innocent man in jail.

Remus and Ron stood guard on either side of Peter and started moving down the tunnel. Hermione flowed suit, leaving Bella and Sirius to trudge along behind.

The silence between them was heavy. Well, what do I tell a man who was my Dad's best friend, was framed by the other best friend and got himself thrown behind bars?

Sirius cleared his throat a bit and muttered something. "I'm sorry, you said something?" Bella asked politely. "Um... I just asked if you knew that your parents named me your godfather."

Bella felt every movement in her internal organs still at his words. Godfather?

Sirius was getting increasingly worried by her prolonged silence. "Bella?" he said tentatively. "I didn't mean anything by it... I mean... Just information, kind of..."

Bella felt something shatter in her heart. "Oh." She said softly. "Right. No, I didn't know that. Um... Cool?"

"Right." whispered Sirius, looking equally put out. "So you know... If you get bored of your relatives or something... or you know... feel like getting a change of address..." he trailed off as he caught sight of her face.

Bella was staring at him in utter disbelief. "Really?" she whispered. "You mean that? I can move in with you? You wouldn't mind?"

"Mind?" whispered Sirius, looking stunned. "Blimey Bella, words can't possibly describe how happy that'll make me!"

"Yes!" cried out Bella. "I'll live with you! Can I move in right away? Do you have a house or something? If you don't, can I help you find one?" Bella stopped talking when she realized she sounded a tad bit desperate.

Sirius was beaming and looked unrecognizable from the walking-talking skeleton he had been a moment ago. Bella stared at him and suddenly realized this was the same handsome man who had been her Dad's best man at his wedding, whose face she had pondered over when she first went through the pictures a guilt ridden Hagrid had put together as she lay comatose after fighting Quirrel.

She surprised him by slipping her small hands into his large ones and squeezing tight. He stared down at her and grinned. Both of them walked silently behind the odd train of people, fingers entwined.

With enormous difficulty, they managed to get out of the Whomping Willow and continue making their way to the castle. The air was chilly and Bella, who had given her jacket to Ron, shivered as the cold lashed against her skin through her threadbare shirt. She was surprised when she felt a pair of arms circle her waist and found herself being pulled back against Sirius Black's chest. "Seriously Bella... Couldn't you find anything warmer to wear?" He asked ruefully, staring at the goosebumps on her arm.

"Sorry..." muttered Bella, embarrassed. Due to her promise to Fudge last summer, she hadn't stepped out into muggle London to buy any clothes. She had been acutely aware that she had grown out of them the last year, but unlike most people in the wizarding world, she wasn't keen on robes. She preferred wearing muggle clothing when she wasn't in class. As she snuggled deeper into Sirius's embrace, she promised herself she would go get some first thing after school closed for the year.

That led to another trail of thought. She felt, for the first time, excited about the upcoming holidays. She wouldn't be going back to the Durselys! Smiling, she hugged Sirius tighter.

Remus looked back and yelled something, gesturing towards the castle doors. Bella frowned as she strained to hear him. He was hardly fifteen feet ahead and she couldn't hear a word he was saying.

And that's when she realized, that everything had muted around her. And it had gotten at-least ten degrees chillier. Sirius's arms around her had tightened, his hands clenching a fistful of her shirt, as though he was struggling to get a hold of himself. And Bella felt them. They were rushing towards them in scores and before she fully realized what was happening, the nightmares and locked up agony broke free. Behind her, Sirius let out a low moan and fell to his knees, dragging Bella down with him. God... No No No!

Bella fought against her own inner darkness desperately. She could dimly see Hermione rush to Ron's side, who, already weakened, had fallen unconscious. Remus had whipped out his wand and stunned Pettigrew, who fell slack against his iron bonds. But before he could summon a Patronus, he staggered and fell to the ground. Like Ron, he was already too weak because of the approaching full moon.

Sirius shuddered, his grip on her painfully tight. "No... Please No..." he whimpered against her neck.

The screams in Bella's head grew louder.

"Don't hurt her... Please... I'll do anything... Kill me! Not Bella! ... Lily! Take Bella and run! It's him! ... You worthless girl! How dare you disobey us, when we've taken the trouble to shelter and feed you?... Hey Malcolm, are you telling me you can't hit her harder than that? Look at her... crying like a baby..."

Hundreds of Dementors glided towards her and Sirius. Amidst all her delusions, Bella grasped at the small shred of reality present in her mind. She wrapped her arms around Sirius protectively and pleaded with them. "He's innocent... Please... Don't..."

The Dementors paused. One reached for her and wrenched her from his grasp while the other reached for Sirius. The one holding her pulled its hood down, and Bella blearily looked into its decayed, sightless face with a gaping hole for a mouth.

She looked around slowly and spotted Sirius in the exact same state as her.

Fire rushed through her veins as the Dementor moved its head closer to Sirius. All of a sudden, the screaming in her head took on a fuzzy quality and Bella broke out of it. Whipping her wand out, with Sirius on her mind, she yelled "Expecto Patronum!"

Something large and silver shot out of her wand. Both the Dementors dropped their prey and retreated. Bella reached for Sirius who stared at her blankly, still recovering.

Both of them held each other, fighting the cold and the residual monsters in their heads.

The air returned to its original temperature and the lilting breeze picked up once more. Bella looked around and spotted Ron, Hermione, Remus and Pettigrew a few feet from her, passed out. She looked up hazily at Sirius, who was looking over her head. She turned around and watched as the large silver creature routed the Dementors till there was none in the vicinity. It galloped back to them, and Bella, fighting the black inkiness that was creeping around her vision, realized the patronus was a magnificent, proud stag.

"Prongs..." she heard Sirius whisper, before she finally gave in to the over-powering darkness.

Bella had been awake for the last minute or so but she continued to struggle to open her eyes which felt like they weighed over a tonne. She could feel the warmth of the sun through her eyelids and that made her panic. It had been night when she passed out because of the Dementors. Half a day was a lot of time.

"Slowly, Bella... Take your time. You've been administered a Sleeping Draught and that will continue to run in your blood for a while, making it difficult to wake up immediately." murmured a soothing, merry voice.

Finally, after a few more seconds of struggling, Bella managed to open her eyes and look into the somewhat blurry face of Albus Dumbledore.

"Headmaster..." she mumbled. "Hullo."

Dumbledore chuckled brightly. "Hullo Bella! I must admit, I think I'm getting used to us catching up just after you've regained consciousness or covered with blood and hauling large swords and evil diaries. I have to admit – I'm jealous. You live an eventful life!"

"Er... Thanks?" Bella said, feeling spent and mystified. "Sir? What happened?"

Dumbledore smiled cheerfully. "Well, quite a bit to be honest. I was returning from Hagrid's hut last evening after calming Fudge and McNair down. Buckbeak's escape had made them a bit... excitable."

Bella, now more awake, stared at him. "Buckbeak escaped?" she asked, trying not to let her satisfaction show.

"Of course he did, Bella!" Dumbledore replied happily. "My heartiest congratulations to Mr Weasley, Miss Granger and you for sneaking into his garden patch and untying him, whilst remaining unseen! Smart of you to wait till the execution committee saw him tethered there first. Hagrid gets away scot free because of that precaution!"

Bella stared at him, colour rising in her cheeks, as she tried – and failed- to assume an expression that suggested she had no idea what he was talking about. Dumbledore grinned at her. "I tried to help as much as I could. I made McNair sign a lot of irrelevant documents. I was prepared to Confund him to stay inside to buy you more time, but really rather pleased that I didn't have to."

Bella sighed in resignation. "You knew what we were planning?"

"I knew it the moment I heard Buckbeak had lost the appeal. Don't look so diminished Bella. You did the right thing. I wouldn't have expected any less from you."

Bella smiled in gratitude. "Thanks sir. That's high praise."

Dumbledore smiled. "Returning to the story - I was on my way back, after calming Fudge and Co, helping myself to a shamefully large portion of Hagrid's brandy and pretending to help in the investigation of the missing Hippogriff. This took quite some time, as you would've

guessed. Almost at the castle doors, I suddenly noticed a mass congregation of Dementors heading toward the Whomping Willow. Naturally, I was concerned. I immediately made my way there, Minister Fudge and Hagrid in tow, when I was greeted by the most incredible sight. The Dementors were being forced back to their stations by the brightest Patronus I have ever seen. And on the ground, the strangest assortment of people lay in various degrees of consciousness – Professor Lupin, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Sirius Black, You... and most astonishing of all – Peter Pettigrew."

He paused and Bella looked at him in anxious expectation.

"Needless to say, it created an uproar. Fortunately, I managed to get all of you to the Hospital Wing without being trampled by the many Aurors and Ministry officials who immediately turned up at Fudge's command. Pettigrew, Sirius and Professor Lupin were revived and under Veritaserum, told us enough to piece together a highly convoluted and tragic story."

Bella blinked. "I slept through all that?"

"Not really. Mr Weasley and Miss Granger, remarkably, slept through all that. You were very agitated and bordering on hysteria. Madame Pomfrey was extremely concerned and with my consent, she forced you to consume a Sleeping Draught. You have been, to use a very muggle expression, out like a light ever since."

"I'm not complaining one bit." muttered Bella. "It was the best shut-eye I've had in years."

She missed the shadow that momentarily crossed Dumbledore's face as she said that.

"So what happens now?" Bella asked anxiously.

"Peter Pettigrew faces a trial, though I think I speak for the Wizengamot when I say that it's a mere formality. He will be sent to Azkaban for life. Sirius Black has already been issued a pardon and a complete apology. They will offer him a post in the Ministry, presumably in the Auror division, where he worked along with your father, before he was sent to Azkaban. Remus Lupin will be awarded the Order of Merlin, Second class for his actions yesterday."

Bella was grinning so widely that her cheeks hurt. "All in all, a good day." she said casually, fighting down the impulse to run around screaming with joy and hug everyone in sight, even Malfoy.

Dumbledore grinned back. "To put it mildly, a good day indeed."

A week had passed and it was one of the most enjoyably peaceful days of Bella's life. Sirius had been officially cleared, Remus had been bestowed the Order of Merlin – a first for a werewolf - and Pettigrew was under temporary lock-up, awaiting his trial. The only hitch had been Snape letting it slip that Remus was a werewolf. The stream of angry letters from parents had convinced Remus to resign.

"They're right." He said firmly, as his third year DADA class, with the exception of the Slytherins, protested stormily.

"Nonsense!" a furious Ernie McMillian exclaimed. "Werewolf or not, you are one of the best teachers we have ever had!"

"Yeah!" agreed Dean. "We'll protest! Write to the Ministry! Anything!"

Remus rolled his eyes at them, but glowed inside. Later on, during the darkest days of his life, he would remember this moment and think that his life was worth living after-all.

Bella sighed and kept glancing at her watch. It was the last working week of school and she had to endure Divination. Ron had skipped it, faking a stomach ache and Hermione finally dropped the class, along with Muggle Studies in the interest of having a normal timetable (Bella highly doubted Hermione would've kept Divination even she was paid for it). She had finally confessed to Ron and Bella the secret of how she managed to attend all her classes. Both of them had stared at her for a full five minutes before Ron broke the silence. "You. Are. Barking. Mad."

"Out of your freaking mind." agreed Bella.

"And the worst part is," Ron continued, turning to Bella, "She put herself through this... mind boggling stupidity- to take extra classes."

"Do you think Madame Pomfrey has something to fix her brain?" Bella asked Ron, while Hermione stared at them slack jaw.

"Doubt it. Beyond repair." Ron said in a tone of great sadness, shaking his head.

Hermione had practically run out of the common room after that and returned half an hour later sans Time-turner.

Bella wished, as she struggled to get a proper breath of air, that she had faked illness too. She almost had but Neville had pleaded with her to accompany him.

"If you're not there, I'm her next favourite disaster magnet. Please please please don't bail Bella. Unlike you, I'm actually afraid of her. Please!" Bella had sighed and given in.

Neville gleefully grinned as he won another quasi sword fight they were having with rolled up parchment under the small coffee table. Bella rolled her eyes at his ecstasy but was really rather pleased. Neville was rarely so happy-go-lucky.

Finally, time was up and everyone, even Parvati and Lavender, rushed to the trapdoor. Bella hung back, waiting for the class to file out. She glanced around and noticed Trelawney struggling with various planetary charts as she tried to put away the material in the shelves behind her.

Bella grudgingly gave in to the Good Samaritan in her and stepped up to help.

Trelawney gave her a misty-eyed smile. "Why, thank you dear."

Bella tuned out the rest of her sentences and continued to stow the charts back in the shelves, occasionally saying "Hmmm" and "I see."

Within five minutes they were done. Wishing the Professor a good afternoon, Bella turned to leave. The sound of tinkling china as it smashed to the ground, made her stop half step.

Spinning around she was startled to find Trelawney's gaze completely off. Her expression was bordering on insane and very un-Trelawney-like. When she spoke, her voice was harsh and abrupt.

The loyal servant returns to his dark master by night

His deeds undoing the reign of light

The Dark Lord will return, more terrible than before

Making the curse close and confusing reality with lore

Worlds will collide, to become whole as it should have been

Bringing with it uncertainty never before seen

The loyal servant returns to his dark master by night...

The Aurors walked silently to the cell at the Ministry's darkened lowest floor. The make - shift cells appeared glazy and the air wavered with all the security enchantments. They reached the last and only occupied cell.

Dawlish frowned. Something was terribly wrong. It seemed too empty. Both of them came to a halt in front of the cell.

"Pettigrew?" Kingsley called out. "Come along now. They're waiting at courtroom seven."

Silence answered them. Kingsley looked uneasy. Something was definitely off. And it hit him. The enchantment had been broken. The cell was stripped off any magical aura. He broke into the locked cell and threw the dark cover off the lump in the corner. Dawlish sucked in a breath behind him. It wasn't Pettigrew under the covers. It was a fellow Auror – a trainee, in fact -staring up at the ceiling unmoving.

"Is he...?"

"Still alive. I can feel a pulse."

"What's wrong with him?"

"Bitten."

"What?"

Kingsley stared at the bluish mark on the man's hand. "He was supposed to do a routine check an hour ago. When he didn't return I assumed he had gone for his tea."

Turning to Dawlish, he said urgently. "Hurry! Issue red alert! Shut off all exits!"

As Dawlish ran, Kingsley turned his attention back to the man. He had already guessed what the poison was. It was a rare one, something manufactured by Rat saliva, Ivy and something else. The real one would've killed the man. But this was clearly an improvised one, only to the effect of stunning the victim.

He turned around to look at the cell door. No man would've been able to break those bars without magic. But it would've taken next to nothing for a rat to slip through them.

We're in some deep shit now was Kingsley's last thought before mayhem ensued.

Firenze paced the forest floor – an activity that was unheard of among the Centaurs. Then again, as Bane often complained, Firenze was as un-Centaur as they came.

"Always worrying and interfering in things which we have no control over." he would fume.

Firenze stopped and made up his mind. He had to warn them. Irrespective of what Bane thinks, this affects us all. The Dark Lord will show us no mercy if he wins. And more importantly, he has gone to terrible extents of distorting the stars itself. The fates can never be properly read, but what he has done has thrown the entire Universe off course.

Firenze began his long walk through the forest, towards the castle. Towards Dumbledore.

James was tired beyond belief. He had just apparated to Hogsmeade to meet Dumbledore in his office. He knew Sirius and Remus were already here.

He wondered how the Ministry was going to fix this one. Rufus Scrimgeour was not his favourite person in the world, but he was extremely competent.

But even someone with all the capability in the world will have a tough time trying to sort out a Death Eater attack on Oxford Street.

It would be a colossal mess because of the sheer number of tourists in that place – muggle and magical alike. The French and German Ministries were already on edge because Voldemort had finally moved out of England and gone international. The attack on Champs-Élysées and the Berlin Wall had finally gotten them to take the Voldemort seriously, after years of complacency.

There were rumours that the Italian Magical Government wanted to cut a deal with Voldemort.

James had laughed his head off when he heard that. Deal? With Voldemort? But he couldn't blame them for trying. The Italian magical community was ancient and rather old-fashioned. They were also tight on the blood issue. But that didn't mean they were willing to comply with Voldemort's insanity. They were keen on protecting their magical artefacts – all very old and very capable of creating problems if they fell into the wrong hands. James shuddered at the thought of any of them within Voldemort's grasp.

He was pulled out of his musing by the sound of a light trot. Instinctively, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the source of the sound.

Firenze came into view. James relaxed.

"James Potter." The Centaur inclined his head as a form of greeting.

"Firenze." James responded similarly. "What brings you out of your forest abode?"

"I intended to seek an audience with Dumbledore, but now that you are here, I would like to entrust you with a message instead."

James was taken aback. The Centaurs were an extremely closed coven. And this was shockingly direct, even for Firenze. "Go ahead." He said cautiously.

"James Potter, I can sense your uneasiness. And rightly so. As you already know, we do not tinker with human insignificancies. What we observe and foretell is always pertaining to the larger picture, more often than not, beyond the human understanding."

James tried not to sigh out loud. Yes I know, Oh Supreme Exalted One! Get to the point!

"But now, it seems even we are left helpless, as the stars move out of their spaces and entire galaxies are thrown off-course. The Dark Lord has gone too far. It's spiralling out of control, James Potter."

"Tell me about it." James said nonchalantly, but a chill ran down his spine at the Centaur's words.

Firenze stopped and turned to face James.

"Youngling..." he murmured, "Tell the wise old human, tell Dumbledore – Time has been broken and what is real and tangible has been split by the alternate choices of one man. Tell him that what will come brings hope, but with it darkness like we have never seen before."

"What do you mean?" James croaked out. Darkness like we have never seen before? We're at the bed of a bottomless chasm already and it can still get darker? "Firenze, tell me exactly what you mean!"

Their eyes met – silver and hazel- solemn and alarmed, "James Potter, battle weary as you may be, know that the beginning of the end is nigh. Whichever way it goes – Light or Dark – the final battle approaches. We know not anymore, what will come to pass. We do know, however, that the time has come."

James' throat felt dry. "Firenze, that's far more direct than I would've ever expected from a Centaur and that frightens me more than anything you might have actually said."

Firenze smiled sadly. "I don't set much store by most of my kind, James Potter. Nor do I possess my species' animosity towards humans. I know, that there is good and bad in all humans, just the same as any other kind. It is my wish, nay, duty to tell you this."

The crickets chirped in the silence as both of them pondered what he had just said.

Firenze suddenly perked his ear and frowned into the forest. "I must take my leave now, James Potter."

James nodded numbly. "Thank you, Firenze. I know what it must have cost you to break away from your kind's inhibitions and come forth with your warning. I speak for all of us when I say we appreciate it."

Firenze smiled at him. "Good bye James Potter. And I have another thing to say, something that will bring light to your heart when you understand it."

James smiled weakly. "Good news? You jest!"

Firenze glanced back at him and said, "Father of the promised child, I have read in the stars that she has grown strong and powerful. She will lead you, she will fight for you all, she will lay her life down for this. But heed my warning, though her soul is pure and shines brightly like the sun, she has darkness in her heart – partly what the Lord of the Night has imparted and partly her own, born of demons in her childhood. Protect your child and be her pillar when the time comes. She needs you now more than ever, even more than she did when she was a babe in arms."

James stood there for a long time after the last sliver of Firenze's shadow disappeared into the forest, his heart barely pumping, constricted by what he just heard.

What. The. FUCK!

James wasn't sure he understood what Firenze just told him. He could only hope Dumbledore would.

He couldn't shake the feeling that the last part wasn't generic advice. It was personal. It was meant for him specifically.

Who is this child with a pure soul and dark heart? How am I supposed to protect her when I don't even know who she is? What the hell did he mean by 'Father of Promised Child'?

Troubled and tired, he looked at the gargoyles guarding Dumbledore's office and said, "Haribo Sour Apples."

Dumbledore stood with his back to the room, looking out of the window. Behind him, James Potter, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin exchanged puzzled looks. The old wizard had gone completely mute after James recounted his run-in with Firenze. They worried that Dumbledore had gone into shock. He turned to face them and all three of them were stunned by what they saw. There were tears in the old man's eyes. He looked happy and miserable all at once.

"Professor..." began Remus uncertainly, trying to quell his panic. Albus chuckled weakly and waved him off. "Forgive the tears, my friends. It becomes harder to hold in the emotions, the older you get."

Albus smiled at them and said, "I have suspected, for ages, what might have happened. Severus Snape had mentioned, but I could never find the guardians... Supposed to be a myth... A legend..." he murmured, almost to himself. The three Marauders looked at one another, utterly bemused.

Albus, noticing their expressions, sighed and said, "This is a bit of a situation, to say the least. I think we better have the entire Order summoned if I'm going to explain. We're in for a rough time, boys."

"Yeah, because it's been such a joy ride so far." grumbled Sirius.

James continued to look puzzled. "Professor? Just another question, if you don't mind. About what Firenze told me, the child... Is it related to what he said first about convoluted universes or whatever? Or is it something else entirely? Should we start looking for this girl? If she's in danger or needs help, I mean, I should find her..." finished James looking helpless.

Albus stared at the man before him, wondering how to answer him. Finally, "James, it is entirely related to what Firenze said about broken time. The girl... she will come to us. We cannot find her if we go looking for her. Not yet."

James looked up sharply. "You've got this figured out, haven't you? I wouldn't be surprised if you know exactly who this girl is..." he trailed off when he saw Albus's grimly satisfied expression.

Remus, who had also been observing him, said quietly, "Who is she?"

Albus shook his head. "Not now. I promise you, I will explain everything. But..." he hesitated and looked at each one of them, "It's not an easy tale to listen to and you must promise me not to... what is that phrase all the children seem to be using these days? Freak out?"

The three of them burst out laughing. "I can't believe he just said that!" James and Sirius guffawed.

Albus shrugged and winked. "Just keeping up with the times boys. It keeps senility at bay. Now, get back to Godric's Hollow and get a good night's rest. I will summon the order for a meeting in a few days when I've confirmed my suspicions."

Remus and James filled Lily in on what was going on. As the three of them tried to decipher the meaning behind Firenze's words, they failed to notice that the normally opinionated and rather loud Marauder sat quietly, lost in his own world. He struggled to piece together the story but he grasped faintly at whatever had instantaneously dawned on him when he heard James' story. He couldn't, for the life of him, shake the feeling that this had something to do with his beloved and long dead god-daughter.

"I will not hit him. I will not hit him. I will not hit him." Bella chanted the mantra repeatedly under her breath, but predictably it was doing nothing for her. Dudley stood in front of her, leering like a moron, flanked by his new Malcolm and Piers – David and Jeremy. They were friends of his from school and were staying with their ringleader 'Big D' for two weeks during the summer holidays. 'Yeah well, it is difficult to get a brain sharing scheme to work long distance', Bella thought bitterly. 'Then again I highly doubt it is one complete brain. Their combined IQ must be some 30. A hibernating sloth is bound to be smarter.'

The older cronies – Malcolm and Piers watched uneasily from the sidelines. Both of them had absolutely refused to take part in the Bella bashing but they weren't courageous enough to stand up to Fat Ass Bully and Co. Instead they just muttered "Come on guys, let's go. There are some gorgeous birds down by the pool ..." or "So... Let's get some grub and leave her alone eh mate?" and throwing her apologetic looks all the while. 'Why couldn't Dudley have picked up their newly developed decency? Why does his

barely existent sense automatically pull him towards the brain-dead school yard bullies?' Bella wondered tiredly. David and Jeremy were treated to plenty of 'Big D's crazy cousin who attends a reform school for juveniles' stories. Somehow, they had come expecting a slut and their fifteen year old brains had salivated at the thought of sharing a house with her for two weeks. Unfortunately for her, they immediately decided she was 'freakin' hot' and that wasn't helping one bit. Their testosterone egged them to resentful aggression when she laughed at them and called them morons. Now she was the 'bitch' who deserved to be bullied. She had to endure three idiots sniggering as against one, when Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia started on her.

It had barely been two weeks down in Privet Drive and Bella was seriously contemplating running away again. She had taken to hiding away in the council library and reading all day. Hermione will be proud Bella thought as she leafed through George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty Four. Bella had always been a voracious reader – a habit developed due to the fact that the library was one of her childhood havens as it was a guaranteed Dursley-free zone. But since she had gotten her Hogwarts letter, she had completely zoned out. Well, good to be back, I suppose. Like good old times.

Bella felt physically ill at that thought. Damn you Dumbledore!

Bella and Sirius had thrown mega sized tantrums when Dumbledore insisted she return to the Dursleys for the summer. Well, Sirius had at any rate. Bella didn't do tantrums. She just shrugged coldly and said 'Fine, Whatever.' while fighting the urge to poke her wand into Dumbledore's eye at that point. Sirius had been... well... frightening. Bella watched with fascinated horror as fury possessed him. He was damnably scary. Bella had made a mental note to never ever piss him off, even by accident. She had new, albeit grudging, respect for Dumbledore. A lesser man would've peed in his pants at the face of Sirius's wrath.

However, even Dumbledore had to admit defeat in his own way – he finally explained why on earth Bella had to live there in the first place. And it did nothing to make Bella feel better. The fact that proximity to her mother's sister gave her a safe home only increased her bitterness. Safe? Right. Have you spent the better part of your childhood friendless, starved, beaten, ill-treated every single day and slept crammed in a dark cupboard, Dumbledore? I'd rather face

Voldemort's supporters, thank you very much! Bella had wanted to say. But that would mean admitting to everything and Bella, though a newly born ray of sunshine after Sirius and Remus had walked into her life, had no intention of opening up to anything. My problem. I'll deal with it. She reminded herself.

After Dumbledore's compelling reasoning, Sirius went from Medusa to something of a cross between anxious and petulant.

"I can take care of her Dumbledore!" He had protested. "Voldemort is not in power anymore!"

"But there are still those who are out to hurt her Sirius. After being locked up with Voldemort's supporters for so many years you should know better."

"But they are in Azkaban!" Sirius argued.

"And how many of them are out? Lying and biding their time? The blood protection has kept her safe. They can't reach her. But you really think they won't try if they find her more accessible? Do you honestly believe they will leave her alone just because Voldemort's stripped off his powers? Tell me, Sirius. You have heard them in their sleep. You've heard them scream for her blood."

Sirius had no reply to that. His shoulders slumped in defeat. "How long does she have to stay at that infernal place to keep the protection alive? Not all summer right? Just a week or two?"

"Atleast three weeks to be safe. Cheer up Sirius. You too, Bella. She can come home to you during Christmas and Easter, as well half the summer holidays. Besides, It'll give you time to settle down, Sirius. Get a house and get a feel of the world. You've been out of scene for 12 years."

Though Bella would rather die than admit it, she though Dumbledore had a fair point. Sirius was incorrigibly happy most of the days. Remus, Bella and him, often accompanied by Hermione and Ron, had lounged about in the grounds, laughing about the randomest things. But sometimes, Sirius slipped up. It would mostly happen only if he was alone with Remus and her. If they drifted into comfortable silence, Sirius would go gradually from chirpy to dead. His eyes would shutter close. His face would turn waxy and gaunt.

The lines on his face deepened and sometimes you could hear him mutter inaudibly to himself. He would become the walking dead. Bella, with her inherent fear and hatred of Dementors, felt helpless when he became like this. Twelve years of seeing the worst of your life pass you by again and again... I crumble in less than two seconds... She knew they could do nothing to save him from himself. She hoped his reinstatement in the Auror division would revive him. Sirius was well, Sirius only when he was distracted and had someone around him all the time. Remus seemed to have realized this because he agreed to live with Sirius permanently without making a fuss about how he didn't want to be charity.

"Sorry Bella." He had grinned. "You have to put up with not one, but two cranky, old, slightly insane men." Bella reminded him that she was a big enough pain in the ass to give a hundred cranky, insane men a run for their money. Remus had laughed and ruffled her hair affectionately. "Pain in the ass? Bella, you are one of the most adjusting, well mannered kids I have ever seen in my life. Well, apart from the sailor vocabulary."

Sirius had perked up at that and said, "Yeah! I've noticed too! Man she swears like crazy! I mean, where did you pick all that up from?"

From my Uncle who gets very creative with foul language when he wants to insult or address me in any way Bella wanted to say. Instead she steered the conversation to safer waters.

Right now, however, she was grateful for the education in language her Uncle had imparted. Big D and Co had walked in to the Costa she was sitting in and reading and nothing short of an ear shattering verbal lashing would keep them at bay.

'I'll give this to Uncle Vernon. He's taught me some good shit' she thought as the three of them practically fled, looking around surreptitiously to see if anyone they knew had seen the embarrassing exchange.

"No you can't come and visit me." she snapped at Sirius. All three of them were in a muggle cafe in Soho. She had taken a day off from Dursleyland to come to London, a fairly easy task given that her Aunt and Uncle didn't seem to care much about anything she did. As long as she was out of their sight, she could go to Zimbabwe for all they cared. Bella thought this was fantastic and a pleasant change

from their erstwhile attitude of trying their level best to make her unhappy. Indifference is highly under-rated was her thought as she got off at Victoria Station to see Sirius and Remus waving madly at her from the entrance. She was impressed at how well they could emulate muggle clothing styles. Remus looked nice with a casual half-sleeved shirt and jeans while Sirius looked hot as hell in some rugged looking ensemble. Hang on... Did I just think my Godfather looks hot as hell? What the fuck Bella? Hormonal much?

"Why not?" argued Sirius as he shovelled tiramisu down his throat at a rate which made Bella think that it would be sadly ironic that a man should survive years and years in Azkaban only to die a few months later because he was a pig around food and choked over a piece of pastry. "I AM the godfather! I should at-least come there and show my face and let them know whose property you are!"

"And that didn't sound ridiculously territorial at all." Bella replied sarcastically. "You're such a dog!"

Remus groaned at that. "Bella I think he's right. It would also ensure they don't mistreat you." As soon as he said that, he wished he hadn't.

Sirius froze half chew and slowly turned his head to look at him. "Define mistreat, please." His demeanour was slowly taking on its Medusa avatar.

Bella cringed. Uh oh...

Remus opened his mouth once, shut it and cleared his throat. "Well... I don't really know... Assuming since Petunia and Lily... You know..." his rambling faded slowly as Sirius continued looking at him.

"Why has this never come up Moony?" asked Sirius with a calm that belied his body language. "You just told me that they didn't get along. You never said anything about ill-treatment."

"That's because there isn't anything to tell." Bella cut in. As Sirius focussed on her, she prayed he would never find out she was literally lying through her teeth. "You know what a moody bitch I am. I tend to get a little over-excited during my Dursley rants. Ask Moony. We're just less than fond of each other but nothing to indicate disaster."

Which brings me to the point... What the hell gave Remus the idea? I've never uttered a word about any of this.

"Actually..." began Remus who looked shifty in a way that made alarm bells in her head go off. "Ron told me about the time he had to rescue you in Arthur's flying car. He said you were literally grilled in and they were starving you... And Hermione told me about some of the bruises in your body... especially after you've just returned from home... And Hagrid said your Hogwarts letters were addressed to 'The Cupboard under the Stairs'... They made you sleep there till you got your first Hogwarts letter didn't they? He also mentioned that you never got presents and your first birthday cake was from him...Ron told me how shocked you were that you got Christmas presents and that you only received a pair of old socks as a gift once..."

Bella sat in rising horror as Remus ploughed on, unable to put a stop to his verbal diarrhoea. And judging from the look of his face, he was trying to get a grip of himself but this was too much pent up information that had been plaguing him and now that it was out, it just garbled out without a stop. Bella had a nasty feeling he might be doing this on purpose. Every time he had tried to talk to her about her Dursley life, she pulled off a Hagrid and feigned deafness. She also had a feeling that he had been dying to tell Sirius all this, but had been too much of a coward to do that when alone with him. Instead he had chosen a place bang in muggle territory and Bella would be a good enough buffer.

Bella and Remus stared at each other, neither of them daring to look in Sirius's way. Bella cleared her throat. "Wow. Hagrid, Ron and 'Mione are a lot more perceptive than I ever gave them credit for. Perceptive and highly imaginative might I add. Moony, nothing of the sort happens okay? Chill. You're over-thinking it. You know me. I love a good fight. The bruises are from socking Malfoy or some Slytherin idiot. I'm always in a fight. You've taught me for a year. You should know that. I am straight from the docks after-all." she finished with a weak attempt at humour.

Remus nodded. "Yeah you're good with the fist fights! That muscle and precision combined with Lily's temper... Phew! How did you get so good at it anyway? Your cousin's a big bloke isn't he? Hmmm... Fred and George mentioned something about how he bullies you. I

think I heard them say something about how a punching bag knows best how to hit..."

Bella exploded. "What the fuck Moony!"

Remus sighed and suddenly reverted to sensible werewolf Marauder as against blabbering idiot. "I'm sorry Bella. But you forced my hand. You're always acting like everything's okay! You're not alone anymore. Please, I'm begging you. Please let us fix things."

Bella felt her throat constrict at his words. "Moony... Just... Shut up alright?"

Remus looked at her pleadingly. "You don't have to be a hero. You're protecting no-one with this facade. Do you have any idea how worried everyone's been? Bella, we're not idiots. When the Dementors come close to you, you cry out a lot of things Bella. It isn't hard to figure out what's flashing in your head. We already know! Everyone saw through your act that night in Hogwarts Express. Please. You have to let us help you... You..."

"Fuck you." Bella replied calmly, a complete contradiction to what she felt. "Help me? I don't need your fucking help. I've taken care of myself for fourteen years with absolutely no help from any of you. Don't bloody patronize me! You want to be Boy Scout? Go find someone who needs help crossing the road. Leave me the fuck alone Moony. I respect you too damn much to continue swearing at you like this, but another word about this and I will get colourful about it. Coffee? The Ethiopian brew here is fabulous. Blueberry overtones."

Remus looked at her and grimaced. "This isn't over Bella. Don't think you've had the last word. And I'm a chocoholic. I'll go for the Mocha-whatever."

Both of them had completely forgotten about Sirius and Bella turned to him ... and almost fell out of her chair.

He was beyond Medusa. His face was expressionless. He looked at both of them impassively, but his eyes spewed vitriol. He was just staring at Bella and the girl-who-lived-and-fought-Voldemort-twice-and-kicked-dementor-ass-and-could-take-on-a-hoarde-of-muscle-

men-and-win quailed under his gaze. Looks like neither Moony nor I are entitled to have the last word on this.

The heel of her boot made an annoying 'clip-clop' sound that seemed too loud in the quiet, forest-ey darkness of a suburban home in Surrey. It was almost ten in the night. Normally Bella would get murdered for returning after eight but after Sirius's little chat with the Dursleys, she could return at three in the morning, drunk, sporting tattoos and piercings and they would quietly let her in. Then again, if Sirius ever got wind of the fact that she was loafing about late at night by herself, he'd be apoplectic. But I'm not coming back from a tattoo salon. Just the library! Bella had taken to staying out of the house as much as possible. Sirius had made her and Moony go get ice cream while he spoke to the Dursleys. She returned to find them looking a bit green and like they'd been forced to sit through the Exorcist in an empty movie theatre. Sirius was sitting looking perfectly calm and downright cheerful. Bella opened her mouth to ask what happened and then changed her mind. There were some things she was better off not knowing. Sure her life was hell-free now. But it was like first year just after the Hagrid incident. Nobody said a word to her or even stayed in the same room as her. Hedwig was hardly in the room, constantly delivering letters to Hagrid, Ron, 'Mione, Moony and Sirius. It got depressing to talk to walls after a bit.

Bella was glad that she could leave tomorrow. Mr. Weasley had managed to get tickets for the Quidditch World Cup and she had been invited, along with Hermione. Sirius, too, managed to get tickets through some Auror connections and he and Remus would be coming along. Bella strongly suspected he had played up his 'I was stuck in Azkaban for years even though I did nothing' guilt card on the Department to get his tickets. Well, if he's come to a level where he's going to be opportunistic about it, then there's hope he might fully recover after-all.

She glanced at her broken Disney watch. Less than a day. Tomorrow evening I'm out of here. At-least this year's exit from the house will be uneventful!

'Yeah, Right.' Would be her response to this thought same time the next day.

Bella stumbled out of the bed, rubbing the scar on her forehead. Her heart was hammering. The dream had been vivid and she

remembered every single detail. The old man... Wormtail... and (impossible!) Voldemort... She shuddered. The last part, when Wormtail had turned the chair and that thing held up the wand, was playing in her head. Just a nightmare.

But Bella felt a chill that had nothing to do with the open window. The loyal servant returns to his dark master by night...His deeds undoing the reign of light..The Dark Lord will return, more terrible than before...

Bella bit her lip so hard it bled. She hadn't told anyone about that day. She had first thought it was Trelawney experimenting variation in her usual drama sequence and brushed it off.

But then, as she had walked down to Remus's office to help him pack, Sirius had hurtled in, eyes wild and nostrils flared. "He's escaped. That damn rat escaped. The Ministry is going crazy. Wingdon has been poisoned by some variation of rat saliva salve!"

As she stared up into Sirius's wild face, her stomach dropped to the floor. The loyal servant returns to his dark master by night...His deeds undoing the reign of light..

And now a detailed dream involving Voldemort which culminated in her scar hurting like crazy... Bella wondered if she ought to tell someone.

It's nothing... a soothing voice whispered in her ear. Just coincidences and your imagination running wild.

Bella felt restless. She stood by the window watching the sun rise, battling a deep buried feeling that told her that this was the beginning of something big and out of all their control.

Bella frowned at her watch. It was half past 5. Mr Weasley should've been here half an hour ago. She wondered what was holding them up, when a loud blast downstairs snapped her out of her thoughts.

Oh. No.

Uncle Vernon's self imposed exile into silence came to an end a second later.

"BELLA! WHAT THE RUDDY HELL IS THE MEANING OF THIS?"

For the first time while travelling by Floo, she wasn't focussed on not throwing up. She was wondering if Mr Weasley managed to shrink Dudley's tongue and fix the living room. Note to self: Do NOT touch anything the twins are handing out!

She stumbled out of the grate and almost fell when someone wrapped their arms around her and held her up. She looked up at Sirius's twinkling eyes. "Hey!"

She looked over his shoulder at Fred and George and smiled widely. "You just couldn't resist, could you?"

"What happened? Did it work?" demanded Fred eagerly.

"Massive, slimy, saliva dripping thing coming out of my cousin's mouth? Check!"

The kitchen filled up with sounds of laughter.

Sirius grinned at her. "They were debating on it. I ... er... gave them the push."

George clapped Sirius on his shoulder. "Good man! All adults should have your sense of humour. Fred and I would have so much fun capitalizing on all that assent."

Bella smirked at the three of them. "Well you better keep your role-model around. Your dad's jumping mad!"

"That's our cue to leave! Later Bellsey!" Fred and George scooted through the back door.

Bella detangled herself from Sirius's arms and went to Moony. On either side of him sat two red headed boys who were most certainly Weasleys. Both smiled at her and eyed her appraisingly. Ron came next to her and put his arm around her and gave her a one-armed hug which she happily returned. She had missed him.

"Bella, this is Bill. That's Charlie!"

Bella, Hermione and Ginny groggily made their way down. The kitchen was already occupied by Arthur, Sirius, Ron and the twins.

"Morning." mumbled Bella. "Where's everybody else?"

"Apparating. They've passed the tests."

"I'm babysitting you lot." Arthur smiled at her.

"And Sirius couldn't bear to be parted from us. So he's giving up sleep to trek with us." Fred chimed in chirpily.

Bella looked at Sirius, who had his head cradled in his arms, clearly asleep. She prodded him awake. His head snapped up, looking wide eyed and alarmed. Bella immediately felt bad. She knew he was still jumpy, prone to bouts of hysteria if caught unawares, a post Azkaban effect. "Sorry." whispered Bella.

He stared, still wild eyed at her, then slowly calmed down. Bella reached for his hand and squeezed tight. He held her hand up to his face and took a deep breath, taking in her scent. "I'm okay." He mumbled, brushing his lips over her knuckles. Molly watched the whole scene from the kitchen, feeling pity and despair. How could a man go through so much and still live with himself every single day?

Sirius blinked himself properly awake. He stared at Bella for a bit before slowly asking, "What are you wearing?"

Startled, Bella looked down. She was wearing something strappy, summery and a pair of shorts. Nothing looked out of place. She looked around at Ginny and Hermione, similarly dressed, but with t-shirts instead. "What?" she asked blankly.

Sirius frowned. "So much skin..." he mumbled so low only she could hear. Bella snorted. "We happen to be a decade out of your depth. Get used to it." she muttered back to him. He just frowned deeper and continued to stare at her in a way that suddenly made her flush. It wasn't the scrutinizing eye of a parental figure. It was something else entirely. His eyes roved her low neckline and the sliver of exposed skin at her waist before trailing down her bare legs. Bella suddenly found herself wondering if he liked what he saw. What is wrong with me?

Thankfully, Arthur got up and announced that they better get going. Bella immediately jumped up and tried to find some way to escape from Sirius, who suddenly seemed too close. Some higher power seemed to have heard her prayer because Arthur beckoned to her. "Er... Bella? I'm awful at handling Muggle money... It all looks the same! And I don't really understand it. It's paper!"

Bella gratefully seized the opportunity to go into a detailed lecture on Muggle currency and which note had what value and its exchange rate against the Galleon.

It was like background radiation – all the screaming, the panic, the hysteria. Omnipresent but incapable of affecting him. Not right now. Auror Sirius Black was out of his tent in a flash as soon as it became evident something was wrong. The parade of dark, masked wizards continued marching, their harsh jeering carrying through the crowd, infusing terror into the night. The Muggles suspended above twisted and writhed with every flick of the wand. The crowd ran helter-skelter, crying out in fear. The Ministry officials stood horror struck, rooted by disbelief. It was the mark of a society that had grown comfortable with peace.

The war had never ended for Sirius. He had been thrown into a cell within hours of Voldemort's apparent demise and had spent twelve years fighting for his life, his soul and his sanity. The last few weeks had been a mere respite between battles and he stood ready as he did all those years ago.

"Arthur! Bill! Charlie! Gather the rest of the ministry! Round them up! Surround them!" he barked.

His voice acted as a stimulant and the older Weasley men jerked out of their trance and rushed forward, wands drawn.

"Fred!" he commanded the nearest twin. "Get them all out! The girls too! Go into the forest and hide!"

Pale faced Fred rushed off to do as he was told. Sirius stepped up. The ministry officials in the vicinity automatically looked at him, anxious.

"Move towards the left! Don't throw stunners yet! They think everyone's fleeing. Attack when we're close enough and when I tell you to!" He shouted. Arthur and Amos flanked him as they ran towards the group of marching wizards, pushing past the crowd that was running the other way. A few more witches and wizards (Sirius recognized fellow Aurors and more Ministry officials) apparated to their side, automatically falling behind Sirius as he lead the way.

"Sirius!" shouted Kingsley. "We need to get the muggles down before we hit them!"

"Jonathan, Ainsley! Stay out of the attack. Move behind the lot of them and be prepared to catch the muggles. Keep them levitated till

we catch this lot. Don't lower them, they might get injured or trampled." Sirius instructed the two trainee Aurors he recognized. Both of them instantly apparated and reappeared behind the masked parade.

"Now! Disarm!"

"Expelliarmus!" they roared in unison. A few wands were wrenched from the Wizards. But some of them were ready and produced shields.

"Stun!" commanded Sirius.

The masked wizards realized they were under attack. As predicted they shifted their attention from the muggles above and pointed wands at the ministry officials. However Ainsley and Jonathan were ready for it and the Roberston family stayed floating above, away from the madness below.

"Sirius! We need to split up! Surround them!" shouted Remus as they dodged curses.

"Remus lead your group to the right!"

Soon the group of wizards were completely surrounded. And now we take them thought Sirius.

A fresh burst of screams started up. What the..? And this time cries of disbelief were heard among the masked wizards who disappeared rapidly.

What the hell? He spun around and his throat went dry. In the sky above the forest, sparkling like a leprechaun formation – the Dark Mark.

No... It can't be...

Bill let out a hiss of horror. "The kids! They're there! Everyone's gone in there!"

His words snapped Sirius out of his shock. Bella!

"North-east section of the forest! Two miles deep! Apparate!" Sirius shouted fighting off images of his dead god-daughter, her eyes flat and devoid of light, just as Lily's had been when he found her that night.

"Move Bella!" yelled Ron as he dragged her by the arm.

"What is that?" she demanded.

"You-Know-Who's mark! Bella we have to get out of here now!" Hermione cried, tugging her other arm.

"What? Voldemort's...?"

A rustling sound was heard in the bushes.

"Who's there?" Bella called out stepping towards the source of the noise, wishing she had her wand. Ron gripped her hand tighter and pulled her back. She wrenched her arm away, her senses heightened. She felt a rush of rage. She wanted to find him. Curse the one who sent the mark into the sky.

Suddenly she was very aware of loud cracks behind her, signalling the arrival of apparating wizards. And she instinctively pushed Hermione and Ron down to the ground and held them there. Instantly, red sparks flew over their head from all directions. Bella raised her head by an inch, her hair wild and swaying with the force of the curses flying overhead.

"Stop!" she heard Mr Weasley cry. "Bella! That's Bella! Ron? Hermione?"

Bella raised her head up higher as soon as the curses were cut off. "Here and alright!" she called back.

She jumped up and spun towards the dark woods again and made way to go there. Bill, Arthur and Sirius had hurried to them and Bill reached out to stop her. She angrily pulled away from his grip and continued forward. "The guy you're looking for is behind here. We heard him. Hello?" she called into the darkness. At her words, the rest of the ministry official raised their wands and pointed it towards the direction she strode towards. Her blood was pumping fast, rushing and thudding in her ear. A supporter of Voldemort is here.

Right here out in the open! The mark was calling to her, propelling her. She forgot that she was wandless, hell, she barely remembered where she was right now. She just knew she wanted to find the bastard. The loyal servant returns to his dark master by night, His deeds undoing the reign of light, The Dark Lord will return, more terrible than before... Trelawney's voice rang in her ears. It's him she thought irrational and wild. Must kill him. Must destroy him. She wanted to curse. She wanted to kill. Rage coursed through her. Voldemort's Supporter...

"What are you doing girl?" yelled Amos. "Stop!"

She felt someone grab her shirt from behind and pull her back. Sirius looked at her, livid. "Stay the fuck here!" he said harshly pushing her back. She looked at him defiantly. "The one who cast the mark is right there. I must find him. The murdering asshole is right there within my reach." she replied, surprised at the calm in her voice. She turned to go when Sirius snarled. Bill held her back, looking shocked. "Bella... what?" Ron and Hermione stared between her and the darkened forest perplexed by her behaviour. Amos strode forward into the darkness, his wand-tip illuminating his way. The rest of them stared after him anxiously.

Barty Crouch strode up her and pointed his wand at her, pushing the tip hard against her throat. "Who did it?" he hissed. "Tell me! You cast it! You did it!"

Bella growled at him, furious at his accusation and made up to push his wand away. Sirius beat her to it, his hand shoving Crouch's. He stepped between them, his face dark with fury. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Crouch took him in for a moment before his face twisted into a sneer. "Sirius Black!" he spat. "I knew it! You did it! She conjured it for you while you stayed back so that you can look innocent! You really think I would fall for that Death Eater?"

Sirius's eyes went flat. "You," he said coldly, "are a raving lunatic, Crouch."

Arthur appeared by Sirius's side looking angry. "Calm down Barty! Think about what you're saying! Bella Potter? Conjure the dark mark?"

Crouch blinked and stared at her, seeing her properly for the first time. He looked at Ron and Hermione and his expression hardened. "Both of you! Tell me which one of you did it? Thought you could lure Bella Potter with you and kill her, did you?"

Hermione and Ron looked stunned at his words. Their expressions were mirrored by everyone else around them, who had completely shifted their attention to the showdown.

"Barty..." an older witch whispered. "They're kids. Stop this madness. Look, Amos is returning..."

Amos Diggory re-appeared, looking extremely hassled, with a small prone form in his arms. He quietly laid it down and refused to meet Crouch's stare.

"Winky...?" whispered Crouch, disbelievingly. His eyes popped a bit. "No.. Not .. It cannot.." he stammered. He turned and strode into the forest, clearly looking for someone else to blame other than his house elf.

"Amos?" asked Arthur quietly, not taking his eyes off Winky.

"Found her unconscious by the clearing. One of our stunners must have hit her. I checked but there was nobody else."

"Impossible." Sirius said quietly. "She would need a wand."

Amos looked at him worriedly. "And she had one." He held up a wand. "Found it two feet from her body."

Bella jumped as she recognized it. "That's... That's my wand!" she whispered, shocked.

Everyone stared at her.

"I realized it was missing when we went into the forest. I don't know when I actually lost it." She explained hastily before somebody else started accusing her of casting the mark.

One of the ministry wizards looked at her. "When was the last time you used it? Can you remember? It might help us figure out when it was stolen." he said kindly.

"No clue. I didn't have to use it at any point today. But I had it in my pocket all the while."

"This makes it difficult. I don't understand how the elf managed to get her hands on it."

"Winky was sitting right behind us in the Box during the match. She was there the whole time, saving a seat for Mr Crouch." Ron spoke up quietly.

The group broke into mutters at his assertion and looked uneasily at the elf and the patch of forest Crouch had disappeared into.

Amos Diggory looked grim. He held up his wand tip to Bella's wand and muttered "Priori Incantatem". A white, hazy version of the dark mark appeared from Bella's wand tip. "Well, we know for sure this wand was used." he said as he handed it back to Bella.

Bella fingered her wand uneasily. It had been used to produce Voldemort's mark of all the things in the world. She felt violated.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and looked into Arthur Weasley's kind face. "It's alright." He murmured. He seemed to have realized what she was going on in her mind.

Sirius was kneeling next to elf. He pointed his wand at her and muttered "Enervate." Winky slowly stirred, just as Crouch made his way back looking disconcerted.

The largely silent group slowly made their way back to the tent. Ron kept throwing anxious looks at her and held her hand firmly as though afraid she would run off again.

Hermione was fuming over the way Winky was treated during the interrogation. "How could they treat her like that? What is wrong with Mr Crouch? He was so callous and the poor elf was frightened out of her wits. She was at the wrong place at the wrong time, which could happen to anybody!"

Sirius looked angry. "Don't bother looking for reasons Hermione. Barty Crouch is a crazed madman. He'll stop at nothing to ensure that he is not in any way associated with this. Dismissing a house-elf is not really an indication of what he's capable of."

Arthur shook his head. "After all these years... It's really killing him isn't it?"

Sirius's face twisted bitterly. "I hope it does."

Bella reckoned Sirius and Crouch had some history but now was not the time to ask. He was already furious with her for her reckless attempt to run after death eaters. He had been ignoring her throughout the walk back.

Bella was too preoccupied to fret over his ire. She was trapped in a nightmare that nobody around her had an inkling of. The signs were getting undeniably frequent. Her scar tingled. Wormtail had escaped the day Trelawney made her prediction. She was having vivid, piercing dreams about Voldemort. And tonight there had been an open attack by Death Eaters. She knew – Voldemort was on the rise once again.

What have I done? Why did I let Wormtail live? Why didn't I tell Dumbledore about the prophecy?

Bella dragged her trunk down the Burrow stairs, feeling cranky and nauseous. They had returned later this morning and were sent to bed immediately. Everybody managed to fall asleep eventually, she being the exception. She couldn't shut her eyes without seeing the dark mark against the darkness of her closed lids.

She was greeted by Remus who looked startled to see her lugging her trunk down. He pointed his wand at it and magically transferred it out down to the parlour. "Why didn't you call me?" he scolded. "There was no need to drag that heavy trunk down!"

Bella just shrugged and rubbed her eyes. "Are we leaving yet?"

Remus and Sirius were taking her back to their flat in London where she would spend the following three weeks before leaving for school. She was glad Sirius was working late. Everybody in the Ministry was,

to sort out the mess at the Quidditch World Cup. It meant she didn't have to deal with him yet. He was still mad at her.

Remus nodded. "No good-byes?"

Bella shook her head. "They're all sleeping peacefully. It has been a long day and I don't want to wake them up. Left them all notes with 'Bye' scrawled on it, no worries."

Remus chuckled. Both of them went towards the fireplace, Remus transporting her trunk near the grate. He threw floo powder into the flames and stepped in dragging her trunk. "Diagon Alley!"

Both of them got a taxi from the Diagon Alley to their house – an apartment on the third floor of a very Victorian looking structure, tucked away inconspicuously. It was neat and looked antique, each floor having just two flats. Remus paused dramatically in front of door No. 6.

"Welcome home." And he unlocked the door.

Bella slowly stepped in, looking around in delighted amusement. It was clear that Remus and Sirius had fought a battle of wills when doing the place up. The room was a haphazard combination of pleasant, wooden, comfortable furniture (definitely Remus's doing) interspersed with wild looking, flamboyant nonsense – a metal shiny lamp-post twisted in random shapes, a large ornate jack-o-lantern, a shapeless bean bag with yellow stripes that was slowly bouncing on the floor emitting squeaky noises every time it hit the ground... Sirius, definitely! Bella thought, grinning broadly.

The rest of house was a reasonably normal wizarding house. A corridor led to three rooms. Remus had the one that was to the immediate left at the head of the corridor. Further down, the corridor ended in two rooms across each other. "The one on the right is Sirius's room. The one on the left is yours."

Bella slowly opened the door to her new room. She broke into a smile. It was quite simply done, much to her relief. A bed, a desk and a closet. The colours were simple and definitely the kind she would've picked on her own.

Bella grinned at Remus. "Thanks a tonne! I love it!"

Remus chuckled. "Tell Sirius that. He was so irritated with it. He said it was nondescript. But I had a feeling I have a better idea about what you like and don't. Extravagance, I have noticed, irks you."

"Too true!" she agreed. "I'm so glad you pay attention, my observant werewolf mentor! I was wondering what I'd do with bouncing furniture and funny little things that squealed about the place."

Remus snorted with laughter. "For some reason Sirius wanted to put more pink into the room, you know, sparkles and fairies and all that jazz. Sirius has a very clichéd notion of young girls."

"Oh my god! I'm in your debt for life! I hate pink! It's Aunt Petunia's favourite so obviously I loathe it. And er... Sparkles and Fairies? I wasn't into that stuff even when I was actually three. I preferred monster trucks, hummers and motorbikes. Wish I had a motorbike." she sighed.

Remus's grin widened. "I'm sure Sirius wouldn't mind taking you for a ride on his."

"He has a motorbike?"

"A flying one."

"I think I'm in love with him."

"Of course you are darling. All things female, with the exception of Walburga Black, love him to bits."

"Can you blame us? The man owns a flying motorbike!"

Sirius got over his irritation in less than a day, the excitement of having her home over-powering it. Bella did, however, have to endure a one hour lecture on how she was a brat with no sense of self preservation. It turned out to be a very good vacation. The three of them lived together peacefully, sometimes setting fire to the kitchen when they went overboard with the cooking. They explored London thoroughly and Sirius promised her that she could have the bike after she turned seventeen. "I better go retrieve it from Hagrid first."

As September 1st approached, Sirius seemed to get moodier. He hung around Bella a lot more and seemed to always want her around. Bella didn't complain one bit. She would miss him just as much when she went back to school. The night before she left, all of them staggered to bed after way too much dinner, wine and the usual 'extol the Marauders' greatness' session, with Remus and Sirius arguing about which was the best prank they pulled off in fourth year.

Bella shifted in bed, feeling gloomy . She always looked forward to Hogwarts and started the countdown as soon as she was picked up by Uncle Vernon. Up till now, Hogwarts had been her only true home. But right now, for the first time in her life, Bella felt a pang of sorrow at having to go to school. She didn't want to leave Sirius and Remus.

Restless, she shifted under her covers when a shadow moved by her door. Sirius was leaning against the door frame, looking intently at her. "Can't sleep?" he asked softly.

She shook her head. He straightened up and walked to the bed. He perched at the edge of her bed and absently played with a lock of her hair. She snuggled closer to him till her head was on his lap, her fingers brushing against his knee. "Don't burn down the kitchen when I'm not there." she said softly, struggling not to get emotional and tell him how much she would miss him.

"Yeah right! You do more damage than either Remus or I can manage even when we're piss drunk!"

"That's your fault! I cook perfectly fine muggle style. If both of you didn't go about brandishing your wands when I was trying to do something, that cheesecake would've turned out just fine. Same goes for the pasta."

His hands trailed up the length of her hair sliding it through them, fisting them, tangling them. "Something's been bothering you these last few weeks, since that night at the World Cup. You haven't been sleeping well. You're always stirring and whispering random stuff. Sometimes you press your hand against your scar."

Bella held him tighter. "If you've been sneaking into my room at night and watching me, which by the way is kind of creepy, you haven't been getting sleep either. Do you still find it difficult to sleep?"

"Don't change the subject. And I'm not here all night. Just for a bit. I like being in your room. It gives me peace to see you safe and warm."

"Nothing is going to attack me. I'm always warm and safe. Stop worrying, you paranoid mutt."

"You still haven't told me what's bothering you."

Bella remained silent. Sirius tightened his grip on her hair. "Bella? Talk to me." It wasn't a request. It was a command.

"Nightmares. Voldemort's in them. The first such episode occurred the night before the World Cup match. He... Wormtail was there. Voldemort was talking to him. They said they needed me. I didn't understand a lot of it. He was talking to his snake Nagini. Nothing I could really make sense of, he was asking her to keep vigil. They were in some old, big house. There was an old man. Definitely muggle. He had come to check, he thought they were common criminals. That old man... he had a limp. He was so brave Sirius. He told Voldemort to face him like a man. And Wormtail turned his armchair around. Oh Sirius... That thing on the chair... It was so repulsive! Small, red, scabby... Vile! It raised its wand and green light shot out of it. That old man was falling dead and I woke up, my scar hurting. It was so real and detailed. Then... Then the death eaters at the stadium... the one that shot the mark into the sky... I don't know what possessed me but I was so angry. It's been building up ever since Wormtail escaped. I've been having nightmares ever since. Not as clear or defined as the first one. Voldemort seems to be on the move in my current dreams. I catch snatches of what's happening but I don't understand any of it. They keep mentioning that missing witch Bertha Joking. Mr Weasley says he's worried about her but Bagman keeps laughing it off. I don't know if my subconsciousness is creating these dreams, piecing together a lot of things I'm worrying about, but Siri, there's something odd about all of this. I remember Betha Joking's name coming up in the first dream and that was before I had even heard of her. I think... I think he's coming back Siri. That witch, she really is in trouble. She hasn't gotten lost like Bagman claims. I think she's been taken by

Voldemort. And for some bizarre reason I'm able to see through his mind or something."

Silence filled the room after her long monologue. She could hear Sirius's breathing speed up, growing increasingly erratic. His grip on her was painfully tight.

"Why didn't you say anything about this to me? Or Remus?" he whispered.

"I don't know. I didn't want to pass on my worrying unnecessarily. For a long time I wasn't even sure I knew what was going on. I still don't. I didn't see the need to bother anybody with this."

"Bother us? Are you out of your mind? You haven't been sleeping, you've been obsessing and worrying! It bothered us anyway to notice all this and not know what was behind it."

Bella remained silent. "I'm going to miss you so much." she finally said, fighting tears. "I can't wait for Christmas already and I haven't even left the house yet."

"Oh Bella..." he sighed. He released his grip on her hair. Bella thought he was going to get up and leave but was surprised when he slid under the covers next to her. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him. She held him tightly, burying her face into his neck. He trailed soft kisses from her temple to her cheek.

"Everything will be okay. You'll see, Bella. We'll find Bertha. I'll talk to Dumbledore and tell him what you told me. We'll do our best alright?"

"Hmmm." mumbled Bella into his neck.

Sirius chuckled. "You'll have a fun year." He said, suddenly sounding uplifted. "The most incredible thing is happening at Hogwarts this year and boy, you are so lucky to be able to witness it. Wish I were in school now."

Bella raised her head curiously. "What's happening at Hogwarts?"

Sirius grinned mischievously at her. "Not going to tell you. You can find out when you get there."

"Sirius! No fair!"

"Oh stop whining you brat! Go to sleep!"

"G'night" she mumbled already drowsy, comforted by the way her body was pressed against Sirius', his hands slowly rubbing circles on her back.

"So that's what Sirius was talking about!" she whispered excitedly to Ron and Hermione as the entire hall broke out in exclamations and intense whispering.

"Blimey!" Ron replied looking stunned. "The Triwizard Tournament is a huge deal. They haven't held one in ages have they?"

"Two hundred years actually." supplied Hermione looking less excited and more worried. "Somebody died the last time and it was deemed unsafe."

Fred and George, who were sitting across the table, were seething. "We'll be seventeen in six months! SIX MONTHS"

"I can't believe we're being held back because of six stinking months! Preposterous!"

Bella rolled her eyes. "Since when have you cared about rules?"

Both of them looked at her speculatively. A gleam entered their eyes.

"Oh you're so right Bellsey." grinned Fred. "It's not going to stop us."

"Who do you think will be Hogwarts' champion?" asked Hermione glancing around mentally marking all the potential seventh years.

"Cedric's seventeen." mused Bella, ignoring the scowls on the twins' faces.

"Pretty boy Diggory?" Seamus sneered. "Come on Bella! No way!"

That lead to an elaborate argument about who could possibly be champion material and McGonagall had to personally come and shoo them off to their dorms.

"She's so totally Veela!" hissed Ron, not bothering to be subtle as he gaped at the Ravenclaw table where the Beauxbatons students sat, particularly at the beautiful silver haired girl, who was looking around haughtily.

Bella was more interested in Victor Krum, who was sitting next to a gleeful Draco Malfoy. "I can't believe I'm sitting less than twenty feet from the world's best Seeker," she moaned in longing. "The guy pulls off a Wronski Feint like it's no big deal. I would crash and tunnel all the way through the Earth to Siberia if I so much as attempted it!"

Hermione sighed and looked like she'd rather be anywhere but between her two idiotic friends. "Are you guys done?" she asked looking pointedly at their empty plates.

"Yeah, let's go." replied Ron, reluctantly tearing his eyes from the French beauty. Neville, who had been squinting at her along with Ron, also got up. "Got to be Veela." he muttered, shaking his head.

"I know right? You don't get them like that at Hogwarts!" agreed Ron.

Neville shot Bella a furtive glance. "Oh I don't know Ron..." he went slightly pink. "Bella is really gorgeous."

Bella blinked at him. "Eh?"

Neville looked at her earnestly. "I didn't mean it in any weird sense Bells. You're my friend. Just stating a fact! Isn't she, Ron?" He ignored Bella who looked mortified, her face red.

"No idea mate." Ron said startled. "I forget she's a girl most of the time. Never noticed."

"Just you, then." smirked Hermione. "The rest of the school seems to have."

"What the hell is wrong with all of you! And what?" fumed Bella, embarrassed and irritated to be talked about in third person like she wasn't even present.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "C'mon Bella! You really haven't noticed? Half the school has been gaping at you like this idiot was at that French girl a minute ago."

"They have?" chorused Ron and Bella. Ron groaned. "Oh great. I was mentally prepared to scare the guys off Ginny, now I have to get started on the evil Weasley older brother act for you as well?"

Bella rolled her eyes at him but felt warmth flutter in her body, like she'd swallowed a mouthful of Butterbeer. The fact that Ron considered her to be a sister to him as much as he did Ginny made her feel inexplicably joyous. It was like having some semblance of a proper family – her greatest dream.

Hermione smiled at the odd medley of emotions that flitted across Bella's face. She put her arm around the other girl's shoulder and the four of them made their way to the common room, happily ribbing one another.

Sirius yawned and stretched out on the sofa. The double shot of Firewhiskey had put him in a good mood. It had been a long day. Moony was sitting across the room looking equally peaceful, albeit tired. It had been full moon the previous night and with no access to Wolfsbane he had to endure a painful transformation at his old forest lodge. Sirius had insisted on coming along with him and stayed through the night by his friend in his Animagi form.

He idly wondered what Bella would be doing right now. Aren't they picking the champions today?

Bella had written to him, elaborately stating who were the possible candidates as well as why she thought Cedric Diggory was sure to be picked. Amos Diggory's son? She seemed to really like the kid. Probably crushing on him. Sirius remembered the good looking boy from when he had met him when they trekked up the hill to get the portkey.

Sirius felt a sudden urge to punch the boy. He scowled at the thought of Bella getting starry eyed over some stupid kid. She isn't the type he convinced himself. Doesn't mean he won't hit on her. Sirius remembered the way the boy's eyes had lit up at the sight of her and the hug they shared. His scowl deepened. A small voice in his head was asking him why he cared. I'm looking out for her! He

convinced himself. And the jealousy is not weird at all. Perfectly normal.

He was distracted by the sound of a beak tapping the window. Hedwig hovered outside.

Sirius immediately opened the window and let the owl in. He looked forward to Bella's letters everyday but he couldn't help worrying about this one. She had already written to him this morning. Remus looked at him, equally puzzled.

He tore the envelope open and read out aloud.

Sirius, Moony...

Ron and Hermione reckon it'd be better if I tell you myself rather than have you find out through the Prophet tomorrow.

My name came out of the Triwizard Cup as the fourth champion tonight.

And before you ask, NO I DID NOT PUT MY NAME IN IT! I'm not mental!

Karakoff (Durmstrang Headmaster) and Madame Maxime (Beauxbaton Head) were hopping mad saying it was unfair and they wanted to re-submit. But apparently that's not possible. Triwizard rules dictate that whoseever name comes out of the cup HAVE TO participate and that the cup won't alight till the next tournament.

Dumbledore tried standing up for me; even Snape(Yes, I know. Too much mead at the feast, I think) and McGonagall were telling them how it's impossible for me to have entered on my own. But they're really angry and won't listen.

Mad-Eye Moody reckons someone bewitched the cup to think it had to pick four champions instead of three and that someone possibly entered my name under a different school to ensure I get in. He thinks it's an elaborate plan to do me in. I'd say he's being paranoid but why else would someone do that? To give me a shot at eternal glory? I think not. Maybe they think they ought to inject some excitement into my oh-so-boring life. WTF!

I don't think anyone's buying that I didn't do it, except for Cedric, Ron and Hermione. It's bloody madness. They threw a party for me at the Gryffindor common room. A PARTY! Like I'm some hero returning from war with bounty from foreign lands. It's ridiculous – and might I add, unnerving.

I don't know what to do .I can't possibly perform tasks Seventh years alone can do but I don't have a choice!

I have to go now. I've snuck out to write and post this letter. I think Mrs Norris is around and I'm not in the mood to be civil to Filch.

Love,

Bella

P.S – Cedric Diggory is the other champion from Hogwarts. Told you!

Remus was out of his chair before he'd completed reading it. He was throwing on his travel cloak, the lines on his face deep and his mouth pressed in a hard line.

Sirius just stood rooted staring at the letter, the world around him standing still. Remus tossed him his cloak.

"Let's go. Hogsmeade. Now. Dumbledore cannot allow this."

"There's nothing we can do, Remus." Sirius's steady voice not betraying his turmoil. "The rules are clear. Dumbledore can't do a thing."

"She will die!" snarled Remus. "Are you going to stand there and do nothing?"

Sirius shook his head. "No. We will go to see Dumbledore for all it's worth. But I'm telling you – it'll be of no use." He glanced at the clock. It was past mid-night. "We'll leave tomorrow. There's no point in going now."

Remus looked at him agahast. "How can you be so calm?"

It's the calm of a guerrilla soldier, just before he gets killed by the army that's captured him. He knows there is absolutely nothing he

can achieve by jumping up and trying to run or fight them, perfectly aware he would die anyway Sirius thought staring out of the window.

"I can't take anymore of this." groaned Bella, as another group of Hufflepuffs gave her the filthiest looks possible while passing her by the castle entrance as she headed out to the grounds.

"Don't bother, Bella." Hermione said soothingly. "It'll pass."

"But they hate me!"

"It's like second year all over again eh? Look at the bright side Bells, the entire school doesn't hate you like the last time. All the Gryffindors and the most of the school's male population is backing you." consoled Ron.

"I don't want to be 'backed'!" she snapped. "I don't even want this! And I like the Hufflepuffs! They're so sweet. Do you have any idea what it's like to get basilisk glares from the school's cotton candy population?"

"Don't let Fred and George hear you say you don't want that. They'll blow every fuse in their brain." advised Ron. "Last I checked, they were composing a poem that celebrated the greatness of the unofficial Weasley family member. They apparently want to be the first one to produce a proper piece of literature on your heroic deeds, so that they can make money out of it when you win and become legendary." Hermione burst out laughing while Bella just glared and wondered how he managed to say that with a perfectly straight face.

"Ask them to write my will instead." Bella replied sourly. "Legendary my ass! I'll be buried in two months as the Girl-Who-Lived-And-is-Now-Bloodied-Chutney-Wrapped-In-Morgue-Plastic-Six-Feet-Under."

"Must you demonstrate your pessimism and your gruesome imagination all in one go just after breakfast?" Ron sighed. "I prefer my food in my stomach, thank you."

Hermione had sobered up after Bella's proclamation. "Don't talk like that. If you aren't even going to be positive, you're really setting yourself up to get hurt."

Bella opened her mouth to retort when Ron cut her off. "Professor Lupin! Sirius!"

Bella groaned as she spotted them walking their way, looking positively grim. "Oh good. We have a free period now so I can't even escape. This is both of your fault. You made me write to them."

"Oh sure, because you would've taken this to your grave alternatively. Best kept secret in the world." Ron said sarcastically.

Sirius reached her first and crushed her against his chest. "You okay? Are you hurt? Are you fine? Don't be scared. We'll find a way to get you out of this."

"Keep this up and you'll do just that." Bella responded, her voice muffled. "I can't breathe! You'll kill me before the tournament does!"

Remus extracted her from Sirius' vice grip and examined her. There were deep bags under her eyes and he knew she wouldn't have slept a wink even if her flippancy suggested otherwise.

"We spoke to Dumbledore. We were examining the rules in detail. I'll be honest – it doesn't look like there's any way out."

"I know." She replied wearily. "Crouch made that amply clear last night. And every time I send you a letter with bad news, I don't expect you to take that to be your cue to come running here."

Sirius scowled at her. "Do you have any idea what a big deal this is?"

"I've been told. Look, there's nothing we can do so let's just get through this."

"You can win this Bella!" Ron exclaimed cheerfully.

"Win? I just want out, with all limbs intact."

Remus and Sirius winced at that. "I agree. Just stay safe. Oh, and watch out for Karakoff." added Remus.

Bella nodded thoughtfully. "He does seem a bit crazed doesn't he? He'd happily kill me to ensure Krum wins."

Both of them exchanged a look. "Well, that and he's an ex Death Eater." said Sirius.

"What?" yelled Ron, Hermione and Bella.

"Oh! OH!" Hermione exclaimed her eyes wide. "No wonder he gave you that look that night the delegates from Durmstrang came! Remember? He was blocking the entrance and he just kept staring at you!"

Sirius' expression was hard. "Stay clear of him."

"Yessir."

Sirius looked at her for a moment then very casually, "So... The Diggory boy is the other champion, is he?"

"Yep!" replied Bella. "But that's not really a surprise. I'm the only wild card entry here. I hope he wins!"

Sirius made an indistinct sound and his expression was neutral, but Bella could swear she saw irritation flash across his face for the briefest moment.

The next two months were hell. Malfoy had managed to rally his gang and half the Slytherins in school to go around chanting "Cedric's the true champion, Potter is an attention seeking minion."

"Well, I have to give it to him. It's a catchy rhyme, though the second line is a bit drawn out. No rhythm." Bella said in a detached tone as a group of second year Hufflepuffs sang it out loud as they passed her, with Nott providing beats using his text book.

The Gryffindors rose to protect their champion and soon an all out war was declared. Bella was strongly reminded of the month before the Slytherin-Gryffindor Quidditch finals the previous year.

"The irony of the situation is that I'm supporting Cedric too." Bella sighed to Neville who was indignantly swearing under his breath at Malfoy on her behalf during a particularly vicious Potions class where Malfoy and Snape formed a tag team in the game of 'Let's humiliate and give Bella Potter hell'.

Bella thought that nobody was as talented as Snape or Malfoy in the art of making life difficult for her. But that was before she met Rita Skeeter. In one meeting during the Weighing of the Wands Ceremony, she wrote a colourful article based on a fabricated interview with Bella. According to the article, she was a sly vixen who used her hero status to gain advantage over people around her. She lived with her godfather whose innocence was questionable and was most certainly a Death Eater, irrespective of what the Wizengamot decreed. She was also known to have Head Boy and champion number two-Cedric Diggory- wrapped around her little finger. She went to the extent of suggesting that she performed 'favours' for important men to achieve her ends.

"Skeeter and Snape should get married pronto." commented Bella as she reached the end of the article. "And favours? Really? Why can't people remember I'm fourteen years old and it's highly unlikely I'm sexually talented enough to please older men! Even Jeremy and David were on a similar trip. Am I giving off some vibe?"

Ron went red at her dialogue, thoroughly appalled while Hermione grimaced at her. Neville immediately jumped in to protest and tell her off for even thinking something like that.

"Don't take it personally Bella." Angelina told her kindly. "It's a standard technique to deride women. Fail-proof and requires least effort. The slut tag is the most over-used slander weapon."

"Absolutely." agreed Katie. "You can't expect much else from a trashy, sorry excuse of a journalist like Skeeter. She's always this vindictive. You should read some of her work in Witch Weekly. Positively crass."

But their words did little to help during potions class where Malfoy made snide comments about how he would pay well, if the goods were satisfying.

"That's it!" snarled Ron, who had taken up the 'protecting the maiden's honour' routine as his personal endeavour. "I'm going to tear his intestines out and stuff it down his gullet!"

But it was, much to Bella's bewilderment, Snape who stepped in. He surveyed Malfoy with disgust.

"Mr Malfoy, I would expect you not to share your twisted fantasies with the general public. If you want to demean yourself, please go right ahead. But you will refrain from disrespecting a young girl. If I get a wind of the fact that you've indulged in any more less than appropriate commentary, I will personally ensure that you will be very sorry indeed."

Malfoy had the same expression on his face as he did last year when Hermione had slapped him.

Snape met Bella's eyes for a second before turning away. Bella felt confused, as she always did whenever Snape took a break from torturing her and protected her instead. The funny thing was that he always took her side where it really mattered. Bella wondered if she would ever really understand the pale, hook nosed professor.

Two days to the first task, Bella finally started showing signs of fraying nerves. It's okay Bella. You can do this. You're the master of getting out of an impromptu mess. Whatever it is, it can't be worse than Voldemort. She kept assuring herself. But the charged atmosphere in the school that was really getting to her.

Hermione and Ron literally had to drag her out to Hogsmeade the weekend before the task.

"It's no good worrying." Hermione told her firmly. "Come out and have a change of scene. It's better than sitting holed up in the castle."

She couldn't have been more wrong. Bella sat between the two of them in The Three Broomsticks, blocking her ears physically with her hands to keep out the continuous train of insults/encouragement.

Hagrid entered the pub with Moody. On spotting them he waved enthusiastically and made his way to their table, his companion in tow. They made small talk and tried-and failed- to give Bella some positive reinforcement. Suddenly Hagrid nudged her. "Bella, meet me by my cabin at ten tonight." he muttered so quickly and softly that Bella had to spend the next whole minute deciphering what he said.

Bella groaned and put her head down on the heavy book, hoping the contents would just seep into her brain by osmosis. She had read everything possible on dragons and apparently there were no books on how to over-power them.

Big, ugly, wild, fire-breathing monsters and every single book is something like what Hagrid would write. Who, apart from that madman, would want to raise them?

She wondered where Norbert was, and remembered how frightfully violent that week-old dragon had been. A fully grown one would be hell on earth.

She had been tempted to write to Sirius and ask him, but she didn't want him suffering a full blown cardiac arrest. Or worse- have him come running here and hoist her over his shoulders and run off someplace far, far away. That would be so cool. We could live happily ever-after and we can go to Greece and lie on sparkling sands and swim in clear blue waters and eat unlimited pita with feta cheese and olives and slow dance by bonfires at night and kiss slowly...

Bella banged her head down with more force and groaned. She had twelve hours to go before she faced a dragon and she was fantasizing about her godfather in a way that god-daughters should certainly not be doing. Stress, she decided is detrimental to one's sanity.

On either side of her, Hermione and Ron looked equally bleary eyed. Bella shook her head. "Go to sleep you two." she said firmly. Both of them vehemently protested but she cut across. "I'm going too. There's nothing here that can help and I'm exhausted. I'll go armed with a water pistol or something."

"You can't do that!" Hermione cried horrified.

"Better that than scan the library all night. This is futile. C'mon. Out we go." she herded them back to the common room feeling very defeated.

Why did I, even for a moment, think I could sleep tonight? Wondered Bella

She got out of the bed, desperately needing to get outdoors and some tranquil nightly silence.

"Nope. Not working." she said out aloud as she stood alone in the middle of the Quidditch pitch. She wondered if Cedric had figured out how to deal with his dragon. The look on his face made Bella feel selfishly relieved. It pleased her to know that she wasn't the only one who didn't have dragon defeating spells at her finger tips.

"Potter?" growled a low voice. Startled she looked to her left where Mad Eye Moody was limping up to her.

"Let me guess. De-stressing?" he asked, raising a gnarled eyebrow.

"And looking for inspiration." she replied glumly.

"And how's that working for you?"

"It isn't."

Moody eyed her closely then let out a breath. "Potter, a word of advice. Play by your strengths."

She arched her eyebrows. "I'm most competent at landing myself in sticky situations. Check."

Moody snorted. "Think about what you're good at. It'll come to you."

Bella frowned. What am I good at? DADA. But a dragon's a bit out of my scope. Quidditch? Yeah splendid, except I need a broom... Broom... BROOM! That's it!

She let out a whoop of joy. So simple! Thank god I consistently ace Charms!

She grinned broadly at Moody. "Sir, you're the best advice giver I know and this is coming from someone who's had far too much interaction with Dumbledore for their own good! Good night and thanks a million!"

Moody looked amused by her exuberance. "Anytime kid. Anytime."

Remus and Sirius had spent a nerve wrecking couple of hours at The Three Broomsticks waiting for Bella to complete her task. As per rules, external people, including parents and guardians weren't allowed. So they sat in Hogsmeade, listening to dragons roaring and Bagman's hyper commentary, imagining the worst. They had rushed into the grounds as soon as it was over and promptly into Bella and Ron who were excitedly jabbering. "Highest fucking scores." she said the minute she saw them. "I'm fucking leading! Imagine that!"

"A dragon!" shrieked Sirius, later when they were alone under an old tree near the lake. "And you knew before-hand! And YOU DIDN'T EVEN TELL ME! HOW COULD YOU?"

"Because I was afraid you'd act precisely like this and burst an artery." Bella told him in a long-suffering voice.

"Idiot! Moron! Nut-case!" yelled Sirius. Bella laughed. "That's the most juvenile set of insults I've heard in a long time. Seriously Sirius..." she never finished because Sirius had lifted her off her feet in a bone crushing hug. He murmured nonsensical, random things into her hair, kissing her face, swaying from side to side. And Bella remembered what she had been thinking about last night. And she wished one of his kisses would land on her lips. Apparently jubilation fucks with your head as well.

Almost as if he read her mind, Sirius bent his head to hers, and brushed his lips softly at the edge of her mouth and held it there for a second. Bella wished someone would strike her dead right then because it would guarantee a happy death. Off centre! Damn it Sirius!

And then Bella realized this was her god-father and he would die of horror if he had any idea what she was thinking about.

She swallowed and pulled back. His eyes blazed with an emotion she couldn't name. They took in her face, her throat, pausing at her breasts and trailed down languidly all the way to her toes. Bella felt her breathing become irregular. His arms burned around her waist and she moved closer.

"Bella?" a voice called out. She broke out of her spell and looked around dazed. Cedric was making his way to where she stood with Sirius. She tried to step out of his embrace but stifled a gasp when

Sirius pulled her to him, holding her tighter. There was something wild and angry about his expression as he watched Cedric come closer. Cedric stopped a few feet from them, unsure.

Bella smiled encouragingly and tried to move away from Sirius, with no luck. She gave up and said, "Hi! What's gotten you looking for me?"

Cedric grinned at her. He glanced at Sirius for a moment and said, "Hello Mr Black!" before turning his attention to Bella. "Wanted to say thanks and congrats! And Bagman's looking for you. He wants all the champions back in the tents. More instruction regarding Task Two, I think."

"Right-o!" Bella made one final attempt at pulling away from Sirius, using more force than before and succeeded. She smiled up at him. "See you in a few minutes okay? Remus, Ron and Hermione are at Hagrid's. I'll come there too after I'm done."

Sirius nodded curtly. Cedric smiled and held out his arm. Without thinking she slipped her hands through it and started up her usual easy going conversation with her fellow Seeker.

Bella though she heard an angry growl but when she glanced back, Sirius had already turned and was walking without looking back.

I have lost my mind. I almost snogged my own god-father. He would've locked me up in an asylum!

She ignored the voice in her head that was telling her that Sirius had been acting bizarre too.

I need a boyfriend. Or a songfest. Or something. And I need it before I end up jeopardizing my relationship with the most important person in my life just because I have no handle on my perverted alter-ego that still can't stop wondering what he tastes like.

This is McGonagall's fault. Bella made her way back to the common room, feeling punch drunk. Compulsory for champions to have dance partners indeed. Stupid Yule Ball. If we need to socialize we should've just had an organized food fight. Or an inter-school Quidditch match. But no! We have to prance around in frilly shit, trying not to fall on our faces. And I can't even go stag and point and laugh at everyone floundering about.

Then again, who I pick for a partner is up to me. This was clearly an insane thing to do.

Bella rubbed her eyes and sighed. It seemed like such a funny thing to do half an hour ago, but the closer she headed to the Gryffindor common room and encountered more Gryffindors who stopped and patted her back or wrung her hands or yelled things like, "Our lioness!" or "Godric's girl!" or even "Champ! You make us so proud! Go show 'em how it's done!", she felt increasingly queasy. It didn't help that practically every unattached male in Gryffindor had asked her to the ball and every time she politely declined (though sometimes she had to use less than gracious phrases to ward off the more persistent ones), they would look around annoyed, wondering who in the common room she would say yes to instead of them.

Bella groaned internally. Stupid inter-house politics. Why should they assume I'll go with someone from Gryffindor? Just because I'm Bella bloody Potter? No one's giving Neville grief for asking Susan or Ron for asking Padma. I hate being Gryffindor golden girl.

The bitch voice in her head laughed hysterically. You hypocrite! You're more pro-Gryffindor than anybody else. And this is so not the same as Ron or Neville's choice. You're so fucked! Ha Ha Ha! She told it to sod off.

I'm not telling anybody. Not a soul. I'll just face it once and for all when I go to the ball.

"Belllllaaaaaaa!" sang Ginny as soon as she entered.

Bella smirked. "I take it that Michael Corner said yes?"

"Yessy yes yes!" she replied sounding like she had gotten an overdose of a Cheering Charm.

"Awesome! Told Ron yet?"

"Noooo! I like that Michael's alive." she said in the same chirpy voice.
"And if you tell him I will claw your eyes out!"

"Scary Bitch!"

"Cat you mean. Meaow!"

"Are you going to be this insufferable all day or is there any hope of this wearing off sooner than that?"

"You could shut me up with good gossip. How about telling me who Gryffindor's Triwizard Champion is going to the ball with?"

"Not Gryffindor!" she snapped, on edge again. "One of Hogwart's champion!"

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Does the belle of the lion's lair suddenly feel enthused with school spirit? How quaint!"

Bella was spared from further disquiet by Hermione coming in through the portrait. She looked as flustered as Bella felt, something, thankfully for Bella, Ginny noticed.

"Out with it! Who? What? Why? When? How?"

Hermione blinked at her and looked around at Bella. "Is she always this annoying or...?"

"Corner said yes. So she's inflicting her good humour on all of us."

"Oh shush, Champion of Grumpiness. Hermione? Well?"

Hermione looked nervous. "Look, promise me you won't tell anyone alright? We both don't want to make this public and you know..."

Bella raised her eyebrows. "Our little genius has been having a secret affair? Wow. These bookish types really do need to be watched."

"I'll say." whistled Ginny.

"Shut up you two. Now, Promise?"

"Yes. Yes. But you do realize irrespective of any oath I take now, you're going to have to keep buying my silence for the next month right up till the night of the ball?" Bella said, making a show of examining her nails. Ginny nodded, also doing the nail buff act and pulling it off, unlike Bella.

"It occurred to me, but I can hope can't I? I'm going with Victor Krum."

Silence followed her announcement and held for a solid minute before...

"You are my hero." Bella was prostrate on the ground in front of Hermione, kissing her shoes. "You have asked GOD to the ball. You will touch the supreme legend himself. Your hands will be held by the same hands that have caught 57 snitches in international matches, each catch being a heaven-sent sight, golden with glory. You will forever shine in resplendence, for you will have spent a night in the proximity of awesomeness."

Both girls stared at her. Ginny looked at Hermione, utterly stunned. "I've grown up with six brothers, inclusive of Charlie Weasley and THIS makes the number one spot in the 'Quidditch related absurdity' list I've been compiling my entire life."

Bella scanned the letter in her hand, tuning out the general babble over Breakfast. She had taken to reading Sirius' letter more carefully these days, looking for signs of abnormality. She had been tense since the day of the first task where she almost kissed him, wondering if he noticed her bizarre behaviour and decided to run away from his mad god-daughter. So far, So good, everything looked perfectly fine. Sirius sounded as normal as always – funny as hell, whiny, an occasional tinge of sadness, a dark comment or two, something daft and irrelevant every now and then.

That's my Siri, no doubt about it. No. Not MY. No MY. Need to stop using possessive adjectives. That's where all the problems start. He could be anybody's. Is he anybody's? He hasn't mentioned anything about dating anyone but Moony swears he was the consummate

playboy in school! Twelve years in Azkaban is one hell of a dry spell. Maybe he's getting some without broadcasting the news. Is he in love? No he would've said something if it's LOVE. So tramp it is. Bet she's ... his type, probably. Unlike me. I don't care if I'm his type or not, so whatever.

Irritated she crumpled the letter and loaded her plate with grilled tomatoes with more force than required, splattering some of the juice on her robe. She was reaching for a napkin when she caught his eye. He had been looking at her from across the hall, an amused smile playing on his lips. Bella tried to fight the blush but it was no go. She shot him her usual grin and glanced around to see if anyone noticed. He was doing the same at his table. He's gorgeous. How have I never noticed it before? Yes! I'm actually imagining kissing someone who's not my god-father! A far less intense fantasy and more curiosity than lust but it will do! Thank you, secret date of mine!

Hermione leaned across from where she was sitting on Ron's other side. "Oi, any luck with the egg?"

"Nope. The other day when you were at the library I tried wailing back at it, didn't work."

"It was ghastly." Lavender groaned. "Bella actually managed to sound like it. Can you imagine having two banshees screeching in your ear?"

"I requested the young ladies to kindly step outside lest they be rendered mentally unstable as a result of the whole experimental procedure." Bella replied delicately. "They declined, as they sought some vile entertainment from my distress."

"Your distress?" scoffed Parvati. "You were enjoying yourself! You were excitedly asking us to judge the 'Wailing Competition'!"

"I was distracting you from your horror!" protested Bella.

"Can we judge?" asked Seamus, Ron and Dean hopefully.

Hermione scowled at her. "Bella the task is at the end of February! You don't have time! Work on it seriously!"

"Yes ma'am." Bella saluted. If she were to be honest with herself, she was getting worried. She had barely managed the Horntail task and had no clue what to do with the egg. She wanted to ask Remus but couldn't bring herself to do it. Her bull-headedness and her instinct to be independent had prevented it.

I'll work it out. Eventually.

Kingsley and Sirius looked at Bagman in disbelief. "She's been missing on way to Albania for six months and you still aren't concerned?" Sirius asked through clenched teeth. "Bagman you do realize Albania is where Voldemort is rumoured to be hiding?"

Bagman shuddered at the name. "You're over-thinking this Black!" he protested. "I've asked my people to check and even Fudge agrees with me – Bertha is more than capable of getting lost!"

Kingsley frowned at him. "Very well, Bagman. It hardly matters what you think anymore as far as Bertha Jorkins goes. The Auror Division will be taking over this."

Bagman sputtered "You can't be serious! Aurors? You can't do that! Do you have any idea how bad it'll look on records that the Aurors had to intervene in my Department?"

Sirius smiled derisively. "That's precisely our point. We've been pushing you to take her disappearance seriously for months now and I've had to listen to your tiresome excuses all this while. If you have a problem with this, take it up with Scrimgeour."

Bagman opened and closed his mouth wordlessly. "Fine." he said sourly, slumping back in his chair.

Nobody got into arguments with Rufus Scrimgeour.

The two of them swept out of his office looking exasperated. "If I ever get my hands on the idiot who hired him in the Ministry, he's going to have to endure one hell of a verbal bashing from me." fumed Kingsley.

Sirius ran his hands through his hair thoughtfully. "I'll give Bagman this - he was a fantastic Beater. Probably one of the best England's ever had. But it was expecting too much to have him run a ministry department. Ideally he would be best suited to handle the Sports department but his lack of basic sense sets him back plenty."

"Understatement of the year." said Kingsley. He sighed, "This is going to really add to our workload. We still haven't a clue where Pettigrew is either. Gawain Robards is taking off for his son's wedding. We're short of people."

"I thought we have a new one inducted? Isn't he supposed to be in today?"

"She," corrected Kingsley. "is at Scrimgeour's office getting the low down. Her name is Tonks."

Sirius frowned at the name. "Sounds vaguely familiar."

"Nymphadora Tonks?"

Sirius's eyes widened considerably. "Oh! Andromeda's kid! She's my niece!"

"And it's a pleasure to meet the infamous white sheep of the Black family!" came a female voice from the Auror station as they entered.

Heart shaped face, twinkling eyes and spiky pink hair, Nymphadora Tonks in all her cheerful glory, stood by the bubbling water fountain grinning up at him mischievously. And Sirius grinned right back, suddenly feeling at home. And burst out laughing when she accidentally lost footing and slammed her hand against the mouth of the fountain, squirting water all over herself and poor Ainsley.

"I see all the Black family grace has been successfully wiped out." he teased.

Tonks eyed Sirius who stood tall, lean and unfairly balanced by the one of the cabins. "I see you've retained it. Oh well! That makes me more un-Black than you! So ha!"

Sirius grinned wider. "But you have the genetic advantage of having a parent who is not insane and completely out of this pureblood

loop! Your mother and I had to work hard to be un-Black! Sorry kid, but we're still more praiseworthy than you."

Tonks sighed in dramatic defeat. "Touché!"

Christmas morning turned out to be fantastic. She smilingly unwrapped her presents including a pocket knife with an inbuilt mechanism to open any lock that was from Sirius. I expect you to use the lock opener more often than the knife. You're scary and intimidating enough without brandishing knives at people- so don't! his note had cautioned.

"How rude!" she sniffed, but was really rather pleased. The knife was totally awesome. Remus had given her a muggle book – To Kill A Mockingbird. It was one of the original prints with Harper Lee's notes scribbled at the side. Bella smiled when she remembered that she had told him she loved that book when she was younger and had recommended it to him. Observant as always.

She opened the gift from Ron, Ginny, Hermione and Neville, wondering what all four of them had seen eye to eye on. And her jaw dropped. Inside the box was a pair of sparkling silver stilettos that would go splendidly with her white dress robes.

"You!" she screeched at Hermione who had burst out laughing at the expression on her face. "This is cruelty! It's worse than Uncle Vernon's old socks for a gift! How could you! How am I supposed to walk, let alone dance with this death trap on?"

"Ginny's idea!" choked out Hermione. "The rest of us couldn't resist. Neville wanted somebody in the Ball to be more accident prone than him. Ron and I wanted a laugh. And Ginny was mad at you for not telling her who you're going with after we found out Cedric's going with Cho Chang. Merry Christmas!" She fled from the room, Bella's insults trailing behind her.

"Don't worry, Bella." consoled Parvati coming to sit next to her on her bed and putting her arms around her, peering into the box. "You'll get used to it. It's so pretty!"

Bella moaned in despair, then shook her head firmly. "Idiots! What makes them think I'll wear this! I'm going to wear my Quidditch dragon skin boots and I don't care how ridiculous it looks! So there!"

Parvati and Lavender stared at her, horrified. They looked at one another then back at her.

"Be here at 5 o'clock." said Lavender, sounding oddly business-like. "And don't bother running away. We WILL find you."

Bella took one look at them and knew she would never have the guts to defy that order.

Bella gingerly made her way down to the common room at half past six, feeling very self-conscious, Lavender, Hermione and Parvati in tow. "I hate you guys." She mumbled at them, specifically at Lavender and Parvati. "I don't feel like me!"

"You mean you don't look like an unkempt wild child. That's good." sniffed Parvati and broke off as she made her way to Dean while Lavender went up to Seamus. Hermione and Bella walked up to Ron and Neville who were staring at them, looking like they'd been hit over the head.

"Blimey." said Ron weakly. "It's something else to see you both like this. Very pretty!"

Hermione smiled graciously while Bella just scowled at him. Neville laughed at her. "Looking even more gorgeous than usual, something I didn't think was possible." he told her, half really meaning it and half trying to annoy her. "Shall we?" he asked holding out his arm to her.

"Yes let's get this over with." She sighed.

She gingerly stepped out of the common room. "I hope my feet bleed to death, so that when I go home tomorrow, I can cry and throw a tantrum and set Sirius on all of you. I hope he turns you all to pumpkin pie and feeds you to Mrs Norris." she told them severely.

"Remus won't let him." replied Ron serenely.

Bella and Hermione made their way to where the champions stood. Hermione smiled up at Krum and both of them began conversing in low, hushed tones. Cedric broke away from Cho and came up to her.

"So," he asked in a very casual voice. "Who's the lucky bloke you turned me down for? Not here yet?" His smile didn't reach his eyes.

Bella winced. "Cedric!" she admonished. "You know I would've gone with you. You're my favourite male in school and honestly the only one I would've really been comfortable with! I just... he asked before you did and it's not like I like him. Both of us have a skewed sense of humour and we were just horsing around being rude to one another and suddenly we wound up agreeing to go together." She finished in a small voice, suddenly hoping the idiot would show up and not stand her up.

Cedric arched an eyebrow. "Really? And..." he trailed off as Bella straightened up, her eyes on her date as he smoothly weaved through the crowd to her. He stopped in front of her, bent down, picked up her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles, keeping his eyes fixed on hers.

Bella blushed and turned to Cedric. "This is Blaise Zabini, a fellow fourth year from Slytherin."

"You were right." Bella murmured to Blaise as both of them scanned the menu. "The reactions are entertaining." Blaise smiled arrogantly. "Of course they are. I told you didn't I?"

The whole school had gone silent as she walked in with Blaise. She hoped the surprise Krum-Hermione pairing would soften the blow but she had no such luck. The Gryffindor golden girl had picked a Slytherin arrogant dick who couldn't be bothered to respect anyone, including his own housemates. She knew there would be hell to pay when she got back from her Christmas holidays.

Blaise on the other hand, looked completely unruffled and kept up his 'greater-than-thou' expression with seemingly zero effort. Bella bit back a smile when she remembered how he had actually blushed when he asked her to the Ball in the middle of their insult trading in the library.

Cedric sat on her other side, glancing at her every now and then, looking utterly perplexed. Even Dumbledore had raised his eyebrows when they had walked in. Bella wondered if Snape would kill Blaise in his sleep. He looked positively terrifying when she spotted him looking their way. Yeah well, I suppose he thinks it's

betrayal that his own students start consorting with a Gryffindor and a Potter no less.

Bella was pleasantly surprised when she had a really good time with him during dinner. He was a fantastic conversationalist when he wasn't looking down on people. As she laughed at something he was articulately criticizing she spotted Ron and Neville who were grimacing at her. Bella tried to sober up but it really was difficult to not smile at whatever he said.

Finally, the champions were called to open the dance floor. Bella let herself get dragged to the floor by Blaise who rolled his eyes at her. "I'm leading. Just follow. That can't be so hard, even for you."

"Be nice or I'll step on you with my pointy footwear and impale your toes."

"I have a feeling you're going to do that without even meaning to. Moronic klutz."

"Arrogant imbecile."

They were cut off by the music. Blaise pulled her to him, one hand on her back, the other hand gripping her right hand and he slowly began to move. Bella kept her eyes on the floor, mirroring his movements. "1-2-3-4 and a turn... and a 1-2-3-4" she muttered.

Blaise groaned, "For the love of Merlin, shut up! We're dancing, not performing a military drill!"

"If you know what's good for you, you'll shush and let me do this my way. Do you want to spend the night at the infirmary with bleeding feet? I think not!"

Blaise let out a long-suffering sigh and pulled her flush against his body, giving her no scope to look down. He slowly willed her to move with him, his chin resting on top of her head. Bella found herself relaxing and she started dancing with more ease, managing a couple of twirls and even a drop.

Blaise smiled approvingly. "I've managed to impart culture to at-least one uncouth Gryffindor. How wonderfully philanthropic of me, wouldn't you say?"

"Just when I think you're alright, you say something to confirm that you are- and always be- an insufferable git."

Oddly enough, Bella hardly let go of him the entire night and much to her surprise, even he seemed reluctant to take his hands off her. Once or twice, somebody would try to cut in and he would stare them down till they hurried off. She sighed contently and pulled both her hands around his neck, resting her head on his shoulders. Blaise pulled her closer, both his hands gently roving her back, his thumbs tracing patterns. "You're actually capable of behaving like a human being. Nice." she mumbled, as she swayed to the sound of a lovely string quartet playing in the background.

"You're not so bad yourself Bella."

She looked up at him in surprise. "That's the first time you've called me by my name. Are you softening up snake-boy?" Blaise smiled at her, but it wasn't his usual arrogant one. This was genuine, his lighting up. "You won me over by not crushing my feet."

"The night's still young. Don't be so optimistic." she grumbled.

Blaise pulled back, and looked uncertain. "Do you want to go out for a bit? Fresh air would be great and it'd be nice if people weren't scrutinizing our every move."

Bella and Blaise strolled out to the grounds, his arm firmly around her waist. The trees were sparkling with fairy lights and the whole place looked splendid. Blaise pulled her to a secluded tree and oriented her so that she had her back against the trunk while he stood in front of her.

"Potter, I'll be honest. I've always thought you were okay but never gave it much thought. I thought it'll be fun to antagonize Malfoy when I asked you to the Ball and generally aggravate everyone. Mission accomplished. But I've had a great time tonight and I want to thank you for that."

Bella blinked at him. Is he serious? Clearing her throat, "I had a great time too Blaise. I agreed to go for the same reasons, pretty much, but you were great tonight. I should be thanking you. You gave me dancing lessons and warded off all the Gryffindors who

were trying to get close enough to slit my throat. And you've behaved yourself and not made any stupid wisecracks on muggleborns or whatever it is you Slytherins pass off as humour"

Blaise smiled. "Anytime." he whispered. His fingers brushed the side of her face, along her cheek bone and down her neck and along her exposed collarbones. Bella shut her eyes and revelled in the feeling. It was nothing like when Sirius touched her but it was pleasant and made her feel wanted. But Sirius's touch sets my skin on fire, drives me mad...Bella swallowed hard and pushed her thoughts away. This unhealthy fetish ends right here, right now she told herself. And it was that thought that spurred her to raise her head as Blaise's slowly dipped, their lips touching.

He slowly brushed his lips against hers and then kissed her fully. And as Bella sank into his embrace, Sirius's face flashed in her mind. Furious with herself, she pulled Blaise closer and kissed him harder. Blaise moaned softly against her lips, responding eagerly. Their tongues battled, his hands leaving her waist and moving to her shoulders, down her arms back and forth, her stomach, her neck, tangling in her long wild hair. Bella had his robes fisted in her hands, whimpering against his lips. His mouth trailed down to her neck where he kissed the flesh tenderly before locking his teeth on it and sucking hard. Her lips parted to release a low, throaty groan which made him exert more force.

And suddenly the cold hit her skin, forcing her awake like someone had doused ice-cold water on her. Snape had pulled Blaise away from her, looking furious.

"Mr Zabini," he hissed. "Detention for inappropriate conduct. Get back in now!"

Blaise opened his mouth to protest but changed his mind on meeting Snape's fiery gaze. Bella snapped. "We weren't doing anything wrong! The grounds are full of people snogging! I don't see you handing out detention to everyone!"

Snape stared at her and took a deep breath. "Zabini, get in. Miss Potter will join you in a minute after I've had a word with her."

Blaise turned and stalked back to the Great Hall. Bella met Snape's stare defiantly.

"Are you mad?" he hissed. "Have you lost your mind? What are you setting yourself up for Potter?"

Bella glared at him. "What is your problem? Can't you go a day without harassing me?"

"Harassing you? You should be grateful I stopped it! Disgraceful! Acting like an animal in heat! I expected better from you Potter!"

Bella fumed at his words. "Animal in heat? You know what? I don't care what you think. I'm not going to rise to your bait. But it's not any of your business if I snog or shag someone!"

Snape stepped closer to her, towering over looking livid. "Grow up Potter. You're not a child. People are noticing that and they will take advantage of you if you don't keep your walls up."

Both of them stared at each other, angry and unhappy.

"Severus?" a voice called out. Both of them turned towards the source of the voice. Karakoff pushed his way through the bushes, making his way to the tree. He stopped dead on spotting Bella next to Snape. Looking unsure, he said "Severus? I need to talk to you urgently. Please!"

Snape surveyed him with a frown and nodded. Karakoff turned back to the night. Snape made to follow him then stopped and glanced back at her. "And though none of your sordid affairs might be any of my business, I suggest you lock away your feelings for Sirius Black." he said quietly so that only she could hear. "I don't care much for traditional age considerations nor am I prejudiced against unique relationship situations. My apprehension lies with Black who is an arrogant, despicable asshole and nothing good will come off it. You have been warned."

He turned his head back straight and disappeared into the night.

Bella's heart hammered in her chest. How the hell does he know how I feel about Sirius?

Nobody knows about that! Hell even I barely realized it!

Can he really read my mind?

Bella tiredly made her way up to the common room after pecking Blaise on the cheek and wishing him good night. Both of them managed to enjoy the rest of the evening in spite of the fiasco that had occurred outside. But they didn't dare bring up the whole issue and Bella wondered where that left them standing.

"Bella?" murmured Cedric from behind making her jump slightly. "Hey!" she waved half-heartedly. His eyes scanned her face, narrowing as he took in her bruised, swollen lips and the dark, almost black mark on her neck.

"I thought you and Zabini weren't into each other?" he inquired mildly.

"It was an opinion altering night."

Cedric pursed his lips, looking like he wanted to say something, shook his head instead. "Merry Christmas. You're going home tomorrow aren't you?" Bella nodded.

"Well, alright. I just thought I'd give you a heads up. Then next time you decide to swim in a pool or lake, take the egg with you. Listen to the wailing underwater."

Bella frowned at him. "Underwater? Why? Does it get drowned out?"

Cedric chuckled. "Just do it." He hesitated for a minute then bent down to kiss her cheek. "Good night." And he vanished in the direction of the Hufflepuff common room.

Bella nervously adjusted the scarf around her neck as she got off Hogwarts express, her bag slung over her shoulder. Sirius swooped down on her and picked up and twirled her around and hugged her tightly. "Bella's home! Bella's home!" he chanted happily. Bella smiled, some of her stress ebbing. He talked all the way to the flat, telling her about work and how Tonks helped him prank the trainee Aurors. Bella just nodded and listened, hoping he wouldn't ask her to contribute to the conversation. The only thing that had happened since the last they spoke or wrote to each other was the Yule Ball

and she did not want to talk about that, particularly with Sirius of all the people in the world.

"Where's Moony?"

"He's gotten himself a job in a Muggle Library. He absolutely loves it. You've gotten him hooked to muggle literature so the place is like heaven for him." Sirius said this casually, but resentment flashed in his eyes. Bella felt equally agitated. Remus was one of the best wizards she had ever met and it was unfair that he had to work in a muggle library stacking books just because he was a werewolf. Sirius and Bella looked at one another and their faces twisted.

"That sucks." Bella said flatly.

"The world's a bitch. Even squibs have more respect in this fucked up wizarding world. But you know Moony. He's not the complaining type. And he uses magic to get his work done. They love him there and he meets university students and has a lot of company. Given the situation, he's thinks he's gotten lucky."

"I guess. He likes having people around doesn't he?"

"Yep. Always did. And take off the scarf and coat. The fire's been on since last night and it's actually hot."

Bella panicked. She had rummaged through her entire trunk this morning and none of her shirts could cover the damnable bite mark. She struggled to think of some excuse.

Sirius returned from the kitchen and tossed her a butterbeer bottle. "So what happened? Didn't you go to the Yule Ball? Now that it's over can her highness divulge the secret lover's identity?" His voice was teasing but Bella sensed an under-current of something else in his tone.

Bella cleared her throat and said "It was alright. Some dancing, eating, drinking, small talk... Nothing very exciting."

"Really?" asked Sirius incredulously. "That's it?"

"Yep." Bella replied, hoping she sounded as smooth as she thought she did. Sirius eyed her suspiciously and his eyes lingered on her

scarf. Suddenly his lips tightened and he reached out without warning and tugged it away.

"Nothing much then." he said, deceptively calm, as his gaze burned at her mark. Bella cringed and mentally cursed Ginny who had refused to teach her the glamour charm to temporarily hide it as revenge for going with Blaise.

She took a deep breath and faced him and almost recoiled at the expression on his face. Wrathful Sirius was back and Bella was bewildered. I know there is something like fatherly concern that rears its ugly head when the daughter-figure comes home looking like she's had a wild night with the boys, but why the hell is he looking like THAT?

"Funny. I never liked Diggory but I hadn't pinned him down as the type to lay his hands on things that were not his." Sirius's voice was Arctic – cold.

Bella could feel the storm brewing out of control. "It wasn't Cedric." she said abruptly, keen on keeping the poor, innocent boy out of Sirius's striking radar.

"Oh?" he inquired, the expression never faltering in its intensity. He looked at her expectantly.

"It's none of your business who it is." Bella told him curtly. "And you can stop your transformation from Jekyll to Hyde. It wasn't much, just some snogging which got slightly excitable. I'm not even seeing the guy so there is no need to start up something."

Suddenly she wanted to get out of here, away from him. Now that she was more than aware of her feelings for him, this conversation was a nightmare doled out from the deepest pits of hell.

She stood up abruptly and snatched the scarf from his unmoving hand. "Where's Remus's library? I'll go say hi to him and grab a bite near-by. Come if you like."

"Sit the fuck down." was the harsh reply, the fury no longer an under-current.

Bella felt blood rush to her head and she felt self-loathing and indignant anger swim to the surface. Ignoring him, she deposited the butterbeer on the kitchen counter and walked to the door. The door locked with a click and barricaded her in. She turned to see Sirius on his feet, his wand out.

He was in front of her before she even saw him move, his hands gripping her upper arm. He shoved her against the door, his eyes wild. Bella struggled against his grip. "I asked you who it was that did this," he shook her slightly. "Blaise Zabini," she whispered, truly frightened by him. This Sirius was the dark avatar – a product of twelve years of being subjected to Azkaban's horrors. This Sirius had no reasoning capacity and tended to be violent and vengeful. This Sirius was out of control at the moment. "Which school? House?" he demanded tightening his grip even more, making Bella think that his bruises were more likely to be permanently marking her than the one he was getting wild about. "Hogwarts. Slytherin," she said the second part softly hoping he wouldn't hear. He did.

Sirius sneered at her. "Slytherin? A fucking Slytherin prick thought he had the right to touch you?"

"I kissed him first!" she snapped, braver than she felt.

And that tipped him over.

Bella gasped and then moaned softly as Sirius's lips grazed her neck. His tongue caressed the existing mark, his teeth biting hard, as though trying to erase it, hurting her. And Bella's entire body was on fire. Dimly she realized, no matter how hard she tried, nobody could replace Sirius. She threaded her fingers through his hair, pulling his face up, her lips trembling against his jaw. He pushed against her, trapping her between his body and the door behind, as he slid his hands down to her hips and pulled her to him. Her lips, slightly parted, traced his jaw line making him shiver. He gripped her hair tightly and pulled it back hard, tilting her face upward. He bent down and pressed his lips on hers as hard as he could. She gasped at the sensation of his fiery lips on hers and parted them.

They had no idea how long they stood there, lips moving fiercely over one and another's, fighting for dominance that Sirius easily won. His fingers played with the skin between her jeans and shirt. His other hand ripped the top part of her shirt open. Pushing one sleeve

down her arm, he latched his lips onto her bare shoulders and bit hard, drawing blood. "Mine..." he growled. "You're mine, Bella."

She groaned at the pain and the other nameless sensation coursing through her body. "Siriiiius!" Her drawn out moan was cut off by his lips crashing back on hers.

A click was heard and both of them jumped apart. They stumbled back to the living room and hurled themselves on the couch, Bella straightening her shirt. Remus poked his head in, smiling.

"Hey you! Thought I'll drop by and have dinner with you two. Welcome home Bella!" He bent down and gave her a hug. Then his eyes fell on the hickey.

"Bella?" he asked slowly, staring wide eyed.

"Blaise Zabini. Yule Ball date." she said hurriedly, her dreaded scandal fading in the face of what happened a minute ago.

Remus groaned and looked at her reproachfully. He then launched into a lengthy tirade on responsible behaviour and Bella sat through it silently thinking how just this morning she expected a talk like this anyway, except she thought it would come from Sirius.

She glanced at her god-father from the corner of her eye and saw that he was staring at her with the same intense expression, his eyes clouded with want and a possessive glint. And though she should've been scared, Bella felt relieved for the first time in weeks.

At-least my sick, twisted, fantasy isn't one sided. In fact, it doesn't feel so wrong now. Does he still get to be my god-father if I end up marrying him?

The short, weathered looking man seemed to float on the path even though one could very clearly see his feet make contact with the ground. His features were nondescript but there was something about him that made people look a little longer than one would at a passing stranger. It was, most people decided, his expression. Serene, yet having the air of a man carrying the weight of world on his shoulders. Quidel felt very far too old for his thirty year old body.

Has it been only fifteen years since that day? His eyes hardened at the memory of the red eyed demon who had wrecked destruction on their tribe. The despotic wizard had ended a tribe that endured centuries.

Oh Gualichu, your final form was one we could not exorcise and you have defeated us. But there's retribution for every crime and with any luck yours will come knocking on your door.

Quidel had reached the iron wrought gates of Hogwarts. He smiled lightly at the grandeur. It had amused him that the English erected such seemingly intimidating masonry in spite of them being largely inadequate against most magical forces.

He stood waiting patiently. He knew that he would need to do nothing to attract attention. His immense magical aura would draw him out. Albus Dumbledore.

Quidel smiled at the thought that he would finally meet the man. He knew everything about him, by observing him in the alternate reality. But it was this Dumbledore he would have to release his soul to. He wondered if the circumstances had changed the man and if he would be different from his counterpart. He doubted it. He knew the man's past and the scars hidden deep inside. Some memories don't allow you to change much.

He felt the man striding along the path. He could feel his alarm, his uncertainty. He felt his hope. Quidel's smile deepened. This Dumbledore had realized the truth by himself. He felt oddly relieved. He would not have to go through the tedium of having to prove who he was and convince him of his highly incredible tale.

Dumbledore slowed down when he spotted the unassuming little man on the other side of the gate. The prayer in his eyes cut Quidel to the very core.

He called out gently, "Albus Dumbledore! I would be honoured if you spare but some time for this old soul. I have a message to convey and I have carried it in my heart, waiting for the right moment. Will you, kind sir, grant me reprieve from my burden?"

Albus didn't ask the man who he was or even cross check for intruders. He knew in his heart who the man was, he knew it the

moment he felt his aura transcended the enchantments on the castle, calling out to him. I knew hope survived through the darkness.

Albus waved his wand in a long sweeping motion and the gates creaked opened. The man smilingly strolled in, looking around at the familiar vast expanse of land around him with apparent interest. Albus smiled and said. "I'm sure you've travelled a long way. Please accept my offer to stay here as long as you please."

He smiled gratefully. "That would be wonderful Albus."

Albus looked at him with interest. "You seem to know my name, good man."

"Everybody does." replied the man with an amused smile. "But I know an unasked question when I hear one. I am called Quidel."

Albus smiled. "It is an honour Quidel. Shall we?"

They made their way to the castle silently. Quidel looked knowingly at his companion.

"You are fighting the urge to ask me something."

"Forgive my presumptions, but I believe you will tell me everything soon. I do not wish to badger you with a thirst that will be quenched on waiting a while"

"Your patience knows no bounds."

"I searched for your people everywhere when I suspected it. But you seemed to have vanished without a trace."

"The Gualichu from the white man's land wiped us out in one night. I was labelled guardian to carry the truth this time and not the curse. I was sent away before he could come. My predecessor had power enough to cover my tracks so that he would never found out about my existence. My people waited for him and stood silently as he killed them mercilessly. They had a fighting chance but they chose to not to take the risk. Instead they sacrificed themselves to release the Magik for a greater purpose. "

They reached the gargoyles guarding Albus's office. They remained silent till they reached his office.

Albus offered him a seat and with a flick of the wand, a pot of tea as well as a glass of iced pumpkin juice appeared on his desk.

Albus waited patiently as the man chose the glass of juice and sipped at leisure. Quidel smiled at him and said, "You require certain people to be present here do you not?"

Albus nodded. "I will summon the Order of the Phoenix whenever you are ready Quidel."

"I have been ready for fifteen years Albus. But tell me, you did not seem surprised. Were you informed of my impending visit?"

"A Centaur's vague warnings served as confirmation."

"Ah yes. Not surprising. They would've been terrified by what they read."

"I'm sorry I didn't for-see this. I could've helped your people. I never realized Tom would go this far."

"Ah Albus, do not berate yourself for not predicting his actions. He is beyond comprehension. Then again, that does make him a bit predictable."

"Does it?" asked Albus wryly.

"For someone who understands him implicitly, yes." Quidel replied.

Albus sighed. "I thought I knew him best."

"You know only of him. You haven't lived his life or his insecurities or harboured a darkness within which tormented you Albus. Your life had its own sorrows and regrets. But they are quite unlike his"

"If we do have someone like him, Merlin save us all. One Tom Riddle has wrecked enough havoc."

"That person will only turn out like him if they surrendered to the darkness. She is not a defeatist nor does she harbour his delusions. Unfortunately, that only makes her suffer more."

Albus looked at him impassively. "The centaur told James Potter that the child has darkness in her heart. Her life must've been a terrible one."

Quidel smiled sadly. "She's different. Feisty, stubborn, easily angered but a born martyr. All martyrs suffer do they not? Her heart is made of gold but she is human after-all. But she is the light itself."

"My doppelganger from the other reality must be taken in by her."

"Oh yes. I think it's the most obvious unspoken truth that Albus Dumbledore puts his faith, hope and all his chances at redemption in Bella Potter."

Author's Note:

Quidel is a Mapuche name that means 'Burning Torch.' Appropriate, I thought.

Gualichu is a Mapuche myth. It is a reference made for a formless evil spirit who is held responsible for all calamities, disasters and wrong doings. He is the embodiment of pure evil.

And to all the reviewers I couldn't reply to via PM – Thanks a tonne for reading! Same goes for all those of you who have subscribed to the Story alert and added me as Fav author/Fav story – Thanks so much! Cheers!

Bella stumbled into the kitchen, bleary eyed to find Moony bustling about. Hoping to God there was coffee supply, she peeked up at him. Moony smiled and ruffled her hair as he passed her on his way out. "Coffee's on the table." he added. "Thank you God, for creating this wonderful werewolf, whom I want to marry right now. How can you be so perfect?" she groaned in relief. Moony rolled his eyes. "You're easy to please."

"Where are you off to? You're fully dressed."

"I'm working today hun."

"Don't you have Christmas holidays?"

"Nope."

"Why do you look so cheerful about that?"

"I love my work! It's great Bella!"

"And people think I'm not right in the head. Sheesh!"

Moony laughed. "I'll see you in the evening. Sirius has off anyway. Have fun both of you! Don't get into trouble."

Bella went rigid. Oh crap...

Moony left in a while, leaving her alone with her coffee feeling very nervous and cranky. After their passionate venting and snogging session yesterday, neither Sirius nor Bella had really spoken to each other. Keeping Moony between them, they managed general-purpose conversation and bantering. As soon as they reached home, Bella had disappeared into her room and locked herself in. And now she was stuck with Sirius all day with no Moony to act as a go between. She wanted to run after Moony and hold onto his leg like a stubborn five year old and plead with him to take her with him wherever he went.

'He regrets it.' she thought bitterly. She had seen the look on his face as the evening progressed. It went from steamy I-want-you-now to horror struck what-the-hell-did-I-just-do. 'I bet he started tripping about he's my godfather and this is wrong and some bullshit like that. Of all the situations to care about rules and general belief system!

My rebel Marauder would've revelled at how totally wrong this is. This is all Moony's doing. His stupid morality issues are rubbing off on Siri.'

She angrily slammed her cup down and glowered down the direction of both their rooms. Coward. Bet he's hiding in his bed.

Incensed and anxious, she walked down the corridor and paused in front of his room. She turned the knob and slid inside, shutting the door behind her. Sirius, as she had expected, was wide awake and jumped at the sound of the door shutting. Sirius unexpectedly, was shirtless and this momentarily distracted her from her mission. Is it normal for fourteen year olds to be this turned on all the time? What is wrong with me?

Sirius sat up, looking at her wide eyed. Bella edged closer to his bed and sat down. Sirius stared at her, then his gaze drifted down her body, eyes widening further. Bella groaned internally, suddenly remembering that a barely visible pair of shorts and a long flimsy t shirt, while serving as great night clothes, were not appropriate when you were trying to deal with a stressed out godfather who happened to be the love of your life.

Bella frowned at his bedside table. "Did you finish that entire bottle of rum?"

Sirius tore his eyes from her legs and blinked at her. "Rough night. I'm entitled to it."

"Well my night sucked as well. If it so works so well for you, I'm going to get drunk every time I can't sleep either."

Sirius scowled. "Don't you dare!"

"Why are the rules always different for you? Hypocrisy is so not acceptable."

"Bella don't start. No drinking till you're forty."

"Don't preach what you can't practice. You're what..? Thirty six?"

"Thirty four, thank you very much."

"Big difference."

"It does make a difference if the girl I'm madly in love with is fourteen years old! I'm a paedophile! I'm an old man!"

Bella glared at him. "I don't care if you're hundred and wrinkly and have teeth missing and need a cane to walk! I'll still want you!"

"That's a seriously disturbing image. You have some weird fetishes Bella."

"Sirius stay with me on this, alright? I'm low on sleep and I don't have the patience to keep getting you back on track. So I'll cut to the chase. Why, after that hot as hell snogfest, are you suddenly treating me like a diseased animal?"

Sirius looked at her agonized. "Bella... This is so wrong. You're a minor. I know you're not a child. Your miserable excuse of a life has taken care of any ounce of childhood in your psyche. But you are underage. This is madness. And I hurt you yesterday. I did more damage than Zabini." his face took on an ugly shade just bringing up the boy's name. Fucking asshole. Let me get my hands on him he thought angrily.

"It didn't hurt as much as turn me on. And I prefer that your mark is a shade darker than his. It's how it should be. And it's not really an issue if the said minor consents, which I do a two hundred percent, and if the guardian or parent is agreeable. Thankfully for us, that authority happens to be you."

"THAT's your argument to make me feel better?"

"I'm saying to hell with all the right-wrong business. The world isn't black and white Sirius. And it's not like we're related by blood. So just let it go."

"I can hear your father turn in his grave. Your mother's threat of castrating me has been sounding in my head all night..."

"It's their fault for naming you godfather. I mean, what were they thinking? You can't be a father figure if you're life depended on it. You're the person I'd take with me to get a tattoo or get advice on

pranking Malfoy or secretly smuggle into Knockturn Alley with or cajole into getting my first round of firewhiskey."

"Wow. You know Lily said the exact same thing when James was trying to convince her that I should be godfather? And in the exact same order. Freaky. And no, you cannot get a tattoo. And to answer your question, they thought I'd grow up one day and be responsible."

"You are grown up. You're not the Sirius they knew."

His eyes went from steely blue to gray. He looked at her and she saw every one of the twelve years of his Azkaban stint etched on his face. "You're right." he whispered. "I'm not. And therein lies the greatest wrong in this affair. Beyond the fact that I'm your godfather or that you're twenty years younger, which as you pointed out, is not relevant when we really come down to it. It's who I've become."

Bella stared at him, thrown. "What are you talking about?"

He reached out and caught her hand, his eyes never breaking contact with hers. "Azkaban Bella. It's broken me. I don't show it and I'm fucking ashamed to admit it and to you of all the people. I can't sleep anymore. I haven't slept once since I've gotten out. I can hear them. I feel it inside me. The darkness... Bella I'm afraid of who I am. I'm not right. I can act normal and laugh most of the time, but it gets me when I'm alone. It's eating away at me, slowly. I can hear voices that are not my own. I can hear laughter, screaming, abuse... I see death. I'm not whole...I'm a ticking time bomb. I'm not good for you. I'll take you down with me. I just know it." His voice shuddered and died, his eyes so empty they looked black. His face was full of lines and his expression so haunted, it made Bella want to snatch her hand away and back away from him.

She calmed herself and a bitter smile spread across her face. She tugged her hand away and he looked up at her, anguished, thinking she had understood and that she would heed him and walk away. It broke his heart. But she surprised him by clambering onto his bed. She slid into the space between his lightly spread legs and sat in front of him, facing him, her legs on either side of his body. She leaned into him, her hands reaching up to trace the lines on his forehead.

"I love you." she said. Sirius closed his eyes. It was the way she said it that made his heart ache with hope. So simple; so clear and doubtless, like it was the only real truth in the world. He kept his eyes closed, unable to face her. Her hands slowly moved to the high cheekbones that stretched his gaunt face. She lightly ran her thumb across, infusing warmth into his skin.

"It doesn't matter how whole you are. I love you for what you are – broken, confused and in pain. It's a part of who you are and I was never so blind as to not be able to see it. Look at me Sirius. Open your eyes." He did. And he let out a deep shuddering breath at what he saw.

Her emerald eyes were dark and hollow. She looked different somehow. Like a darker, colder, emptier version of herself. "This is me. This is what I am. I've never gotten into details of my childhood but I'll give you a run through. I've never had friends. I've been beaten. I've gone for days without meals. I've had my ribs broken by my cousin and then punished after I've returned from the hospital by my Uncle and Aunt who thought I was wasting money on medical bills. I've slept in a cupboard, crunched into a foetal position to fit, for ten years. I've been called an orphan, nobody's girl, a non entity. I was told my parents were layabouts who killed themselves in a drunken stupor. By the time I was six, I knew what sexual harassment meant. I was the easy target – the non person female who no one cared about. I've been called a criminal, a thief, a liar and a sure slut-to-be. I've grown up thinking life was unfair and I've learnt to fight the shit around me – physically or by developing a sharp enough tongue. By the time I was ten, I learnt how to – and I wanted to – hurt everyone around me. I wanted to kill. I swear, there were days when I've gone to the living room holding a butcher knife thinking 'this is it... it ends today'. And then Hagrid came and it was like everything fell away."

She took a deep breath. Sirius sat frozen, sickened and horrified by what she had told him. He wanted to run. He wanted to tell her to stop talking. He wanted to ask for details. He wanted to shut his ears. He wanted to hold her. He wanted to push her away. He wanted to weep.

"I'm fourteen." she whispered softly. "I feel a hundred. And I aged after coming to Hogwarts. I was a heroine because my parents died and I didn't. I'm suddenly saving the world on a regular basis when

honestly, most days I couldn't care less if it burned to ashes and we all just died with it. And yet I do. Ron and Hermione... Sirius I can't tell you how much I love them. They mean the world to me. They've stood by me and offered to die with me. Me! Bella good-for-nothing-burden-to-her-relatives Potter. And Hagrid and Moony and you. But I can't ever tell all of you that sometimes what you really need to be saved from is me. There were times when I thought Voldemort is right when he said there is no good or evil. I know what you mean about darkness. It never goes does it? You can forget for a while. You can pretend it's not there. And then you have a moment of silence and all the demons you keep locked in, come roaring to life." she whispered, finally letting her voice fade away.

The silence grew and nobody stood in its way. It filled the room and the sliver of space between them. Finally,

"Fancy that. We're made for each other." Sirius said softly, his tone acerbic. Bella's smile mirrored his tone as she stared blankly at his bare chest. "You're repulsed by me."

"No." he whispered. "I'm just terrified for both of us."

Bella met his eye and stared him down. "You were trying to warn me, but really, it's my turn to give you one. I love you with all my heart and I'm strong enough to take on my demons as well as yours."

She held his gaze and looked at him piercingly.

"But you must know, I'm not the golden girl. But you've always known that haven't you? You always know me best."

Sirius smiled sardonically. "It takes one to know one."

He stared at her, his heart beating faster. She looked cold and fiery all at once. She was so fucking beautiful even when immersed in the blackness of her heart. She was the dark goddess Hecate. She was beautiful Aphrodite. She was powerful Athena.

She was wronged Persephone who was stolen from her sunshine and flowers, stolen away to a far away world under the earth for a life she had never bargained for.

"Oh Bella... You're looking for light in Hades? I'm not your redemption." Sirius told her harshly.

Bella laughed. "And I'm not yours either."

Sirius's lips inched towards her. "What will we do my beautiful girl, when the time comes for us to face what we've become?" His warm, alcohol laced breath made her shiver in anticipation.

Her lips touched his and stayed there, burning like fire.

She whispered against his mouth. "What we always do – the right, honourable thing. But for now, I'd rather you be Nero and play me like a violin, heedless to the world burning and crumbling around us."

His mouth possessed hers, and she responded eagerly. Their doubts lay in shreds, their souls bared; they ached for each other.

He bit her bottom lip and sucked on it gently. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled herself impossibly closer to him. He sat up straighter; his hands on her hips and slowly pushed her back, his lips still in sync with hers. She wrapped her legs around his waist, locking her feet behind him. He pushed himself on his knees and laid her down on the bed, hovering above her.

Her dark hair was splayed around her, like an ebony halo. Her eyes smouldered, her lips slightly parted. She looked ravishing. It was so easy to forget she was a young virgin.

He parted her lips with his tongue and tasted her warmth, playing with hers. One of his hands propped him up while the other ran slowly traced her throat and made its way down, between her breasts and down her abdomen till they reached the hem of her flimsy, threadbare shirt. He slipped his hand inside and placed it on her warm, flat belly, groaning into her mouth. Her hands were tracing the contours of his chest, pausing at some places and grazing past some.

Sirius couldn't take it anymore. With a throaty growl, he whipped his hands from under her shirt. He caught the collar and ripped it all the way down, leaving her exposed. She was bare underneath, something he was unprepared for. He pushed the remnants of her

shirt aside and let out a breath at the sight of her pale skin and perfectly round breasts with their reddened nipples.

"So beautiful..." he choked out. She blushed shyly and Sirius froze. Right at that moment, she looked vulnerable and fourteen. Hesitantly he got up and off her. He sat at the edge of the bed, gripping it and taking deep breaths.

"Sirius?" she whispered, uncertainly. He turned to look at her, her bare skin calling out to him, a small pair of shorts the last line of defence before he got where he wanted to.

"Sorry." he whispered. He reached for her and she slid behind him, her arms wrapped around his waist, her naked upper body pressing against his back.

"Can we just take it a little slow?" he pleaded. "I don't intend to make you wait years, don't worry, but everything in one go, in one day seems wrong."

She kissed his ear lobe and the pulse point beneath. "Whatever you're fine with Siri. I was told you run through women, so this is a bit of a surprise. Should I be insulted?"

"You're not any woman. Give me time. I will make you mine. But for now..."

He turned to her and gently pushed her back on the bed. He kissed her hard, wanting to take her right then and there. His hands worked on her breasts, kneading and caressing, making her moan softly. His lips trailed down and took over from his hands which began exploring every inch, every crevice and every curve. His jeans came off in a bit, leaving him in his boxers, whose strap Bella toyed with, making him wish she'd just pull it down and give him relief.

They stayed like that all through the afternoon, his lips and hands on her nipples, or exploring every millimetre of her exposed skin, making her cry out and plead with him to go through with this. They finally caught up with their lost sleep together, their limbs tangled, barely clothed, skin on skin.

"Sirius and Remus are coming to Hogsmeade today? Neat!" exclaimed Ron. It was the weekend after the second task and Bella

already felt the pressure of the looming third task. She wondered what this one would be. Dragons, Mermaids, Grindylows... I've had a crash course in DADA and Care of Magical Creatures for NEWT level this year. I've really, really had enough. This year cannot end quickly enough.

The second task had almost ended in disaster and as she picked out socks for Dobby from Gladrags Wizardwear at Hogsmeade as a thank you present for intervening and getting her the Gillyweed minutes before the task, she mused over how sheer dumb luck had stepped in to save her. She had almost messed it up again by waiting down there till she was sure everyone was safe and finally ended up dragging Gabrielle and Ron out together. Bella felt like an idiot whenever she thought back. Obviously nobody would really be injured! But her stupidity had won over Fleur Delacour who was convinced that Bella was an absolute darling. She transformed from her ice queen behaviour towards her and had taken to waving and smiling enthusiastically whenever Bella was around. Bella was still leading, tied for first place with Cedric.

Sirius and Remus were waiting for them at The Three Broomsticks. Bella groaned at the thought. The last time she had been here, she had a very public and very loud confrontation with Rita Skeeter. Bella had already been on the edge because of the articles on Hagrid's giant heritage and the fact that he had taken to hiding inside his cabin, refusing to talk to anyone. One look at Skeeter's simpering face had been enough to get Bella to explode. The fact that Bella Potter had stood up and told Rita Skeeter to get a fucking life and had called her a lot of interesting adjectives was still news in school.

The three of them waved to Sirius and Remus who had occupied a corner booth, away from the crowd. Bella caught Sirius's eye and felt heat pool in her stomach. She missed him so much it hurt, especially at night. Both of them had gotten used to sleeping in one bed over the Christmas holidays and she still woke up, her hands automatically reaching behind her, expecting to find him curled around her. Sirius glowed as he watched her stride in his direction. Both of them fought the urge to reach for one another. They had decided to keep it a secret because as Sirius had pointed out, nobody would approve and they decided to procrastinate telling anybody, including Remus, in the interest of keeping their sanity intact.

"I love you guys, I really do. But having you around school during my break day is not cool. You're cramping my style!" complained Bella.

Sirius jumped and said, loudly and dramatically, "Oh Bella sweetie! Don't be mad baby! Come now! Wipe that frown off your adorable face! We'll buy you any trinket you want, just don't sulk okay? There's a good girl. Smile for your Uncle Remus and god-daddy! Go on!"

"I will murder you in cold blood." Bella told him darkly as a couple of third years near by giggled at her; Ron, Hermione and Remus roared with laughter.

Sirius flicked his hair out of his face sexily and raised his eyebrows at her.

"Baby doll," he drawled. "I hate to burst your bubble but it's you who's cramping our style. WE are always prone to being attacked by lovesick, adoring groupies wherever we go."

Before she could dispute that, Madam Rosmerta appeared at their table, in all her glittering glory. She gave Sirius a smile that Bella though was unnecessarily indulgent.

"My my!" she gushed. "Sirius Black! Just as charming as you were back in your school days."

Ron leaned in, disbelieving awe apparent in his face as Sirius unabashedly flirted with her. Hermione and Remus rolled their eyes at them and started talking about something else. It was all Bella could do to not break his glass of mead over his head and wipe that woman-magnet smile off his face.

Idiot.

Bella drummed her fingers on the table, trying to tune into Remus and Hermione's conversation and block Sirius's smooth flirting as Rosmerta got progressively less subtle with her suggestiveness.

"Bella?" Bella blinked and turned around. Blaise stood in front of her with a slight smile. "Interrupting something?"

"Hey Blaise." Bella replied slowly, registering how Sirius went dead quiet when he heard the name. What is with the universe and its seriously fucked up sense of timing?

Blaise smiled wider at her. "Never managed to get in a word with you. You've been busy with the task and everything else."

Good lord... Of all the moments in his life Blaise decides to make small talk, this had to be it?

"Yeah it's been a bit tight. Haven't seen you around much barring class and well..."

Blaise smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry I didn't come up before. I thought you were mad at me..." he broke off glancing around at the table, seemingly noticing present company.

Bella quickly got up, seeing Sirius's face slowly transform into his Medusa expression, while Rosmerta stood by him, looking put out by the fact that he stopped paying attention to her.

Well, something good had to come out of Blaise's sudden inappropriately timed chattiness. In your face Rosmerta! Ha!

"Why don't we take this outside?" she suggested, keen to get him out of Sirius's reach.

Blaise smiled at her. "Sure. Privacy would be great." Bella groaned internally at the heavily loaded tone as he said that and hoped to God Sirius didn't notice the way Blaise was staring at her mouth. She literally dragged him out of there, with a quick 'Be right back' tossed over her shoulder at them.

Both of them strolled out into the pleasant residual cold in the air. Before she could stop him, Blaise reached for her hand and held tight. Bella walked faster, well aware that Sirius was watching through the window and would have clearly seen that.

"I'm sorry." Blaise told her softly. "I mean, what with Snape walking in on us and everything else, I kind of ... well..."

"I know. Don't worry about it. I haven't come up to you either remember?"

Blaise nodded. "Look, I know this may seem a bit late, but would you like to go out with me? You're not obliged to say yes because of what happened that night."

Bella stared up at him, at a loss for words. She felt awful. She had never given their making out session too much thought because really, it was Blaise Zabini – the personification of 'Like I Care, Get Out Of My Face And Stop Being Dramatic.' Now as she took in the hopeful expression in his incredibly good looking face, her conscience berated her for using him as a Sirius substitute. Have I sunk that low that I take other people for granted so easily? she wondered feeling depressed.

She cleared her throat. "Blaise... I like you. I really do. But..."

Blaise held up his hand, still smiling. "I know. That was one night. I understand."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I knew it was a long shot and honestly it's not like we could've made it work long term. But I couldn't resist. A moment of weakness, when I saw you sitting there."

Her eyes softened. "I really like you, you know."

"I know. No hard feelings. This'll make being friends easier."

She grinned at him gratefully. Blaise rummaged through his pockets. "I got you something."

"You shouldn't have."

"But I did. It was too extraordinary a moment to go through without making some ceremony of it."

He held out a small box. Bella frowned and opened it and her jaw dropped. Inside the box was a thin silver necklace which had a silver pendant dangling – a lion with a snake entwined around it.

Blaise grinned at her. "It was historic, admit it. A Slytherin and Gryffindor went on a date and instead of killing each other, they kissed passionately."

"You're breaking my heart. I actually feel like taking you up on your offer now. How did you manage to get this?"

"Got it made." He frowned at the uncomfortable expression on her face. "Don't even go there Potter. It's not like it's a dent on my pocket. And I did it more for me than you. You're my first ever date and in my family, these firsts are treasured. My mother is divorced five times, sixth marriage in the making. You know what I mean. I would've regretted it later if I didn't honour the moment."

"You're ... weird. And I love it. Thank you. Can you put it on for me? This clasp looks out of my engineering ability."

Blaise rolled his eyes and motioned for her to turn around. "First ever piece of jewellery Potter? That's a shame."

"Yeah well, people feel inclined to giving me knives or swords or chain saws or a book on what's new in street fighting. They figure I'm that type and to be fair to them, I usually am."

His hand brushed her neck as he fastened the clasp and turned her around. He fixed the pendant so that it was clearly visible, tight against her throat. "Pity. You look too beautiful for that sort of unruly nonsense."

Bella blushed. "Er... thanks? I think."

Blaise smiled at her. "Well, it looks like I've already eaten up enough of your time. Had to do it here and now. I can't possibly do this in school surrounded by our beloved housemates. They still haven't let me hear the end of it for going with you."

"You and me both." She replied ruefully. "I'll see you at Potions on Monday."

"Let's sit together during Potions. It can be our weekly tryst and possibly the only way we can talk in peace. Besides, I feel like giving Snape some ventricular blockage."

Bella laughed. "Deal."

She waved goodbye to him and made her way back to The Three Broomsticks, deep in thought. On reaching the table, she noticed that Remus seemed to be literally holding Sirius down, who had a very uncharacteristically ugly expression on his face, no doubt bought on by her prolonged disappearance. Ron looked equally peeved and Hermione seemed to be telling him off. Bella reached her chair and sat down, pointedly ignoring both of them. "So Remus, you said in your letter you wanted to talk about something."

Remus nodded. "It's about Crouch. You said you saw him in the Map, lingering in Snape's office?"

"Yeah but I haven't been able to follow up on that. Mad Eye has the map. He was keen on it once I told him what it does and I figured he'll make better use of it."

Remus nodded approvingly. "Good."

"What's the deal on Crouch anyway?" asked Ron. "He's gone loco. Remember how he was that night they found Winky in the clearing? Why was he over-reacting like that?"

Sirius barked out a laugh. "Barty Crouch is an insufferable piece of shit. I hope he rots in hell."

Bella looked at him thoughtfully. "He's some major pet peeve of yours isn't he?"

Sirius sighed and rubbed his eyes. "It goes way back. James and I had just completed our Auror training and relatively new to the Department. We were already part of the Order of the Phoenix, along with your mum, Moony and Wormtail, among many others. The Order of the Phoenix was an elite resistance group started by Dumbledore to counter Voldemort." he added noticing their blank expressions. "We were the new generation, just out of Hogwarts and we were fighting back with all we had."

Remus spoke up, "You have to understand what it was like back then, when Voldemort was in power. It was a terrible time. People were getting murdered left right and centre and you didn't know who you could trust or even if that person is trustworthy, you could never

be sure if they were under the Imperius Curse. It was like fighting in the dark, trusting just your instincts. It was in that atmosphere that Barty Crouch became the Head of Law Enforcement. If you think about how it was like, it's easy to understand why his ruthlessness had mass appeal."

"Barty Crouch was an extremist, much like the Death Eaters themselves but for this end of the spectrum. He put up new legislatures that gave Aurors phenomenal powers – we were allowed to use the Unforgivables among many other wide variety of dark magic that were previously banned. His motto was fight fire with fire." said Sirius. "There were many who applauded him, because with the free reign we had now, we found it easier to fight back. But there were a few who thoroughly disapproved. Your dad, Mad Eye, Frank Longbottom and I were part of the latter group. We thought he was going about it the wrong way. The worst of his decrees, which I didn't realize back then, was allowing a suspect to be thrown into Azkaban indefinitely without trial."

"So Crouch was doing his thing and things were, even if I'm loath to admit it, looking better. We at-least looked like we had a fighting chance. The rest of us did our best and tried not to over step the lines the way the other Aurors seemed to be doing with ease. In fact, Mad Eye did his best to avoid killing. Always got them in alive if he could help it."

"Naturally, there were differences of opinions which led to a full fledged battle of wills. Crouch always thought James and I were being insolent and he was angered by our loyalty to Moody. Very simply, we disliked each other."

"Then it happened. I was arrested. Crouch could've ensured I have a trial. Even though everyone believed I was the spy, a lot of them including Dumbledore and Moody were keen on a trial. Crouch wouldn't have any of that. Threw me in and let me rot."

Sirius's voice had gone sub-zero in the last few words. Bella, who was sitting across him, reached for his hands and held them silently. Sirius recovered and shook his head. "But that's not the end of the story."

"You see, Crouch was ambitious. He was keen on getting the Minister for Magic post, which looked like a distinct possibility

because of his hero status." Remus said. "Then something quite unexpectedly tragic happened. Barty Crouch's son was caught with a group of Death Eaters for torturing Frank and Alice Longbottom for Voldemort's whereabouts."

"You're kidding me..." Ron let out a low whistle. "That must've been one hell of a blow to him."

Hermione winced. "Imagine having to defend that in public. Not good campaigning material is it?"

Remus shook his head and Sirius said, with a cynical smile playing in his lips, "You nailed the heart of the matter Hermione. He never defended his son. He publicly disowned him, refused to listen to any of the boy's defences in his trial and he sent him packing, along with the Lestranges, to Azkaban."

"He disassociated himself from the thing that jeopardized his career. It just so happened to be his son." Remus added, watching their horror-struck expressions.

"Sounds like Percy." commented Ron. "Who, incidentally, is Crouch's personal assistant." he added for Moony and Sirius's benefit. "He's been standing in for Crouch during the Yule Ball and the Second task."

Sirius frowned. "What do you mean? Crouch never takes off from work! It's his first and only love."

"Well he has been lately. I asked Percy during the Ball and he says Crouch hasn't been well and has been working from home. Percy's literally running the office by using his instructions in the in-tray." Bella replied.

Sirius and Remus exchanged puzzled looks. "Doesn't sound a bit like Barty Crouch at all. Especially if he's sneaking into Hogwarts to sneak up on ex Death Eaters."

Bella looked at him sharply. "Ex Death Eater? Karakoff, you told me before. Snape?"

Sirius looked at her incredulously. "You're kidding me right? You don't know that Snape used to be a death eater?"

Bella's jaw dropped. "No I didn't! I think he's a pain in my ass and can be evil if he wants to, but a Death Eater? How is Dumbledore even allowing him to teach?"

Remus gave Sirius a thoroughly disapproving look. "Don't listen to Sirius Bella. He's prejudiced. Snape was indeed a death eater, but he turned spy for us much before Voldemort's fall. Dumbledore trusts him implicitly and he wouldn't do so unless he had a very good reason."

"Yes he would." Ron and Sirius said together.

"Dumbledore gives every lunatic a chance. Always sees the good in people." Ron said dismissively.

"And Dumbledore is usually always right." came Hermione's reply.

Sirius was looking thoughtful. Then he turned to Remus. "I heard something back when I was in Azkaban. Bagman was accused of helping the dark side to wasn't he?"

Ron spat out his butter beer and Bella almost dropped her glass. "Bagman?" asked Hermione, astounded.

"He was passing information to Rookwood, but it was an accident. He was cleared by the Wizengamot."

Bella rubbed her eyes. "Lot of potential Death eaters running about the place..."

Ron was looking thoughtfully at her. "say Bella, you don't reckon he's the one who put your blame in the cup I mean, he keeps hanging around you and making small talk and trying to help..."

"What?" demanded Sirius. "You never told me this!"

Bella shrugged. "That's because I never gave it much thought."

Hermione however was looking at Remus with an odd expression. "Um.. Remus? You said Frank and Alice Longbottom... were they... Neville's parents?"

Bella and Ron straightened up and looked at them. Remus looked at the three of them strangely. "Hasn't Neville ever told you why he lives with his grandmother?"

Bella's throat went dry. "They were killed by that assault?"

"No." replied Sirius quietly. "They were tortured to insanity. They are permanent residents at Mungo's ward for the mentally ill."

Bella felt the darkness creeping up around her, threatening to choke her. Fury raged. One day, I will avenge them all. I will avenge every single person who's been affected by Voldemort's indiscriminate madness. I will rip all his fucking Death Eaters piece by piece and feed them to the dogs. One day, I will make them all pay.

Bella and Cedric dragged their feet from the Quidditch pitch stalling and grumbling about how the days seem to stretch indefinitely and how no reason was good enough to warrant the mutilation of a Quidditch pitch.

Bagman caught up with them and put his arm around Bella's shoulders. "So Miss Potter, how're things? All set for task Three? Well of course you are! After the daring feats of One and Two, this will be like a cake walk to you eh?"

Bella rolled her eyes at Cedric, who smirked at her and altered his gait to imitate the excitable bounce Bagman seemed to always have.

"Sure thing Sir. Just planning on going in and doing my best." she replied neutrally.

"Marvellous." he replied, his voice warm honey. "If you need..."

"I'll be fine sir, thank you." Bella cut him off firmly. Bagman opened his mouth but Krum cut in with his rich east-European accent.

"Bella? Do you mind if we have a word?"

Bella blinked up at the tall, normally silent Bulgarian.

Did he just speak to me? Did Victor-awesome-Krum just speak to ME?

"Ah.. s-s-sure!" Bella stuttered back.

Bagman and Cedric looked at Krum, the former curiously and the latter suspiciously. Krum lead her away from them, near the forest boundaries.

Must not blubber and squeal like his head groupie. Must not whip out a quill and beg him to sign across my forehead. Must not fall on my knees and tell him how I'm a fanatic of the Krum religion. Must not embarrass Hermione, consort of the supreme God and my best friend.

Krum looked at her nervously, shuffling his feet. Bella blinked at him. Say something before I start singing some sonnet in your praise she prayed silently.

"We have never spoken before, have we?"

"No." squeaked out Bella. Before she could stop herself she gushed out, "I love the way you play Quidditch. It's un-bloody believable. I almost fell off the box balcony when you pulled off the Wronski Feint. My god! It's like my life-long ambition to do that without getting pummelled by the Earth. And the way you fly! It's like you don't even have a broom beneath you! And..." she broke off.

"Sorry." she said in a small voice. "I tried not acting like a crazed fan but you are just awesome."

Krum was looking at her amazed. "I'm very flattered that Bella Potter is a fan." He said finally, smiling.

"Don't tell Hermione about this alright?" she pleaded. "I'll never hear the end of it."

Krum chuckled. "She tells me a lot about you. I'm happy to meet you finally. And I wanted to talk to you about her."

Bella looked at him curiously. He pulled out a small delicate silver rose from his robe pockets along with an envelope. "Please give this

to her. She never accepts gifts from me and I thought if I send it through you, she can't not take it."

Bella grinned. "Yeah Hermione gets embarrassed by all that."

Krum grinned back. "She says it's something the two of you have in common."

Bella shrugged and smiled. "I empathize with her, but I'll make sure she gets it, even if I have to confound her to accept it."

Krum smiled gratefully. "Thank you. And..." he hesitated. "One day you'll have your own crazed fans. I watched you during the first task. You fly extremely well. I hope to play against you in an International match some day."

Bella's jaw dropped. "Really?" she asked weakly. "Blimey... You've made my day! No, you've made the next couple of years for me!"

Krum laughed and started to say something when a rustling sound behind distracted them. Tumbling out from the forest, looking wild and disoriented and apparently in the middle of a conversation with the thin air, Mr Crouch ambled their way.

His eyes fell on Bella and something seemed to clear in his dazed expression. Looking petrified, he stumbled forward and seized the front of her robes. "Bella Potter... Tell him... Dumbledore... Made a terrible mistake...He has come... He is rising... Tell... Dumbledore..."

Krum stepped up, seized Crouch's hands and tugged them away from Bella, looking alarmed.

Bella stared at him for a second then turned to Krum. "Keep an eye on him. I'm going to get Dumbledore."

James played with Lily's fingers and slowly kissed each fingertip. Lily rolled her eyes at him, but smiled and kissed him. "I love you." He murmured in her ear.

Lily sighed and leaned into his chest. "And I love you too."

They kissed again, this time letting it get intense.

"Ahem, snoggers in the area: You are expected to get a room." Sirius broke into their bubble in his usual obnoxious way.

He strolled into the living room where both of them were sitting. "Come to think of it, hold in all the horniness. We're having the meeting in a bit and nobody wants to wait here, looking at one another awkwardly while you two are doing it upstairs."

Lily scowled at him. "You're just aggravated because you're not getting any."

Sirius sighed. "So true. All the security measures make it so difficult to sneak in the birds. Even the blonde babes with daddy issues are off house limits. And I've never been one for a quickie against the wall."

James nodded. "He's all about a quickie inside closets, on top of his bike, under the kitchen counter, in the shower, on the balcony, in the practice pitch behind the house, but god forbid he does it against a random wall!"

Remus strolled in. "I always find it disturbing that James is so clued up about Paddy's sex life."

"Tell me about it." agreed Lily.

"Because unlike Goody Two Shoes Wolf boy and Little Miss Muffet here, Prongs always keeps his ears open when I'm recounting my brilliant escapades. So obviously he's the blessed one." Sirius replied.

"Paddy... Little Miss Muffet?"

"Yeah... You know... the one whose curds and whey were stolen by some spider."

Lily looked at him in astonishment. "That's a muggle rhyme! When did you become so clued up, you pureblood spawn of the noble house of Black?"

Sirius smirked at her. "There's this muggle cutie I hooked up with. She taught me the stuff. It was part of a... um... game."

Lily quickly put her hands up. "Don't want details ,thanks. Please tell me she was above eighteen."

Sirius glared indignantly. "Hey! I draw the line at that! Yes I tend to be a bit depraved but I'm not that bad!"

"She was teaching you rhymes Padfoot. One does tend to wonder." Remus told him dryly.

Albus smiled serenely at everyone around him. All of them were trying their best not to stare too hard at Quidel next to him. He sat at the head of the long, ornate table. The various faces looked curiously between him and Quidel, wondering what was going on. James and Lily Potter, flanked by Remus Lupin and Sirius Black sat nearest to them. They, will be hit the hardest. Tonight, everything changes for them. And Frank and Alice too. I can only hope good comes out of this. They won't survive the loss twice. Albus sighed at the thought. I won't allow it. he vowed. I will give up my life to save them.

Alastor Moody, Emmeline Valance, Fabian and Gideon Prewett sat at the far end of the table. The twins had been a wreck since their sister and her family had been massacred by Lucius Malfoy, Rabastan and Bellatrix Lestrange. They had become wild, angry and beyond reason. They mutilated the kids' bodies. It was terrible. Those kids were like their own. And Molly and Arthur... Merlin, Dumbledore. You don't even want to know what those shit-bags did to them. Alastor's soft voice, as he told him what happened, rang in his head. Dumbledore sighed. Things would change for them too.

Sturgis Podmore, Nymphadora Tonks and Kingsley Shacklebolt sat by Frank and Alice Longbottom.

Dumbledore, who had revelled at their second chances, now felt apprehension. He knew nobody would survive losing their loved ones twice. And more importantly, would they even take the news as something worth celebrating? For the first time in many years, Dumbledore felt uncertain and nervous.

He smiled gently at all of them. "Ladies and Gentlemen. I'll warn you in advance, this will take some time. And I would also like it if nobody stormed out or attacked anybody or caved into hysteria in any way."

Everybody exchanged looks, anxious and weary.

Dumbledore continued. "The equation has shifted a bit and before you ask me this later, yes, I had suspected it all along, but never had proof. But now, I do."

He turned to the smiling, vague little man next to him, whose reddish brown skin gleamed in the candlelight. "Quidel, these are the members of the Order of the Phoenix."

Quidel smiled placidly at the bemused gathering. "A pleasure to meet you all!" he said. "I have known only memories of you; it is quite something to see how you've all turned out in such different circumstances!"

He was rewarded with looks that seemed to question his sanity. Dumbledore decided to intervene and inject some semblance of a beginning and sanity to the conversation.

He turned to James. "Do you remember a few months ago, when we discussed Firenze's warning?"

James straightened up, his expression growing sharper. The rest of them leaned in, not noticing Sirius's rapidly paling face. "I'll know now. Once and for all. I'll know if this has anything... If there's any hope... Bella..." His eyes glinted, shadowing and ablaze in rapid successions as he struggled with hope and dread.

Dumbledore took a deep breath. "I'm afraid I have to come clean. I haven't been very honest with all of you about certain matters. I thought it to be in interest of our perseverance to keep you in the dark about it. But the time has come now, to tell you what you what I have been keeping from you for years."

"You aren't going to admit you're an ex Death Eater are you?" asked Tonks warily, unable to take the build up.

"Or that you and Grindelwald were drinking buddies?" added Sirius laughingly. Nobody noticed Dumbledore's slightest flinch at Sirius's words or Quidel's lips twitching.

Lily rolled her eyes at them. "Let the man speak will you?"

Dumbledore shot her a smile and continued. "Have any of you heard of the Iron of Babylon?"

Blank looks came his way.

Quidel smiled. "Perhaps I better start from the very beginning."

The fire crackled lightly as the firewood splintered and fizzled in the inherent chill in the room.

"Magik comes in many forms and can be harnessed in numerous ways. What you, wizards and witches, do is deal with its more refined, tamed version, that which is preset in the air around us. You have the power to gather this energy to a focal point, using your wands or just your will, and direct it to some use."

"I am aware that in your community, you believe that only a few mortals, the magically inclined humans are capable of it. Parents who possess this ability pass down this unique sensitivity to higher energy to their progeny. Some believe that keeping this blood unblemished from mixing with those who are ignorant of it will preserve this power. Purebloods, you call them. And then there are those who are born with this capability without any scope of inheritance. Muggleborns, you call them?"

Kinsley low, deep voice flowed across the room. "Indeed sir." His patience did not mask his unspoken query. Who is this queer man who stated the most obvious facts like he found them amusing and distant?

Quidel immediately picked up his hidden question and smiled. "Forgive me. I come from an old and ancient race that looks at the magical world very differently. We believe Magik lies for those who can take it, whether they have the power or not. You will be surprised young man, at how many Muggles are so perceptive to the throbbing beat of the universe when most wizards remain oblivious. To our race, it has always been about awareness, perception and the ability to acknowledge higher forces, rather than the Magik itself. I find the class distinctions in your magical world to be amusing."

Taking a deep breath, he continued.

"Magik in reality is a wild force. It lies at the very core of our earth, in the vacuum in space, in the sky, the sun. It is everywhere, waiting to be noticed. It is powerful beyond belief. The Ancient races always acknowledged this. They picked up on the vibrations and understood its driving force. These civilizations respected and harnessed these forces, gave them forms and stories so that future generations would continue to revere, respect and use this force for the well being of the human kind. You will find that all ancient civilizations are tied down to this force, culturally and spiritually. The African Continent, from the Nile valley right down to the Cape of Good Hope, the Australian Bushmen, the Indians with their million

gods and frenzied rituals, the Arabic peninsula, with Mecca acting as the beacon for this power, The Greeks and Romans and their reverence for their many gods and goddesses and their mortal super heroes... My home – the American continents- has also worshipped this force as forms of nature."

Quidel trailed off, lost in distant dreams of his Pacific coastal home with the Atacama gleaming gold in the evening sky.

"But, Magik, like everything else, always stood in the danger of being abused. Myths, stories and legends always speak of demons and wily creatures who threatened all that is good and true and just. Magik always takes turns in backing a force. Sometimes the light, sometimes the dark. The scales are rarely balanced, always tipping to one side. It was during a dark period, centuries ago, that the Iron of Babylon was forged."

"Its creators remain unknown. They could've been terrible men who were desperate to win, or they could have been curious people who sought to experiment with Magik. We will never know the story behind its creation. All we know is that it was forged in the very centre of the world – Mesopotamia. Deep within the fertile soils fed by the Tigris and Euphrates, power from under the earth was summoned to create a terrible weapon – a curse entombed in fine iron wrought in unearthly fires."

A shiver ran down the group. The room became perceptibly chillier and their thoughts despondent. Suddenly, nobody wanted to know why they were talking about a dark, ancient curse now.

Dumbledore spoke up softly. "The Iron of Babylon was immediately removed by the forces of the Light, away from the land where it was forged and recognized. For centuries, it made its rounds around the world, to those civilizations where at that era, the magical community was strong enough to protect it from those seeking to use it to achieve their ends. It went from Babylon, to the red sand Lords of Afghanistan, the Shaivites of the Himalayan Peaks, the Priests of the Nile, the Wanderers of the Gobi desert, the Mongolian Wind masters, the Nymphs of the Yangste, the Ninja Sensei in Hokkaido..."

"It traversed down to Polynesia... The Kalahari Bushmen... For some time it even came back to Europe though it hardly ever went to its

western fringe. It stayed in the custody of the Roma Gypsies for a while and in the Central Asian Steppes. Finally, it made its way down the American continent, far before the Muggle Columbus did."

Quidel picked up the tale once more. "It travelled down the length of the Rockies and finally made its way past the Strait of Panama to us, the Mapuche of Chile. We were protected by the Magik that was always bestowed on the guardians of the Iron of Babylon and we were spared from the invading fury of the Mayans and the Spaniards, who were unconsciously staved off by the power."

"The Iron always attracted its fair share of bounty hunters. Wizards and Witches from the east, who naively believed that all Magik could be contained; Some from the ancient civilizations which had at some point guarded it; Muggles even, who had found the legend of the Iron lodged in some inconspicuous corner of their histories and myth. Nobody ever proved to be a threat, just minor inconveniences. You see, nobody really understood what the Iron could unleash."

"Then... he came." Quidel's calm facade fell away and he looked mutinous. The Order instantly recoiled at his deadly expression, ill-befitting his small, humble stature. "Voldemort. The madman from across the Atlantic. He was young, handsome and already past redemption. He was polite... oh so polite... charming even. But we were no fools. My entire race saw what he sought to hide – the fact that he was the first real danger in hundreds of years."

"We stood between him and the Iron. Our Magik was too strong for him and he left, recognizing temporary defeat. We fell back to our routine but were always uneasy. We knew, that he was no ordinary evil. He would return. My predecessor started observing the signs that pointed to the inevitable. He kept his ears open for news from the land on the other edge of the ocean. And when he returned, we were ready and unfortunately incapable of stopping him."

Quidel's expression died out and clear mourning and regret painted his face.

"Did he... You escaped? Are you all in hiding?" whispered Alice timidly.

Quidel looked at her sadly. "I wish I could affirm that, but no. He wiped us all out. I was appointed Guardian days before he came

and Magik was summoned to shield my presence. I remain unknown to him. He thinks we're all gone, none to bear witness to his heinous crime. As Guardian, I snuck away, unable to defend my people as they stood silently and let him slaughter them."

"Let him slaughter...?" croaked out Remus. "Why... You could have fought him! You managed the first time!"

"He was stronger this time around." replied Quidel quietly. "And to what end? We may have won but we may have lost too. No... We were the guardians. Our first duty is to protect the Iron as well as protect others from it. We died and our sacrifice released our protective Magik for something far greater. We used it to reduce the time span of the curse. Instead of say, a century, we cut down the life of the curse to fifteen years."

Fabian narrowed his eyes. "Forgive me for intruding, but I've been wanting to ask you something. What in the blazes does this Iron do?"

Dumbledore let out a deep long sigh. Quidel leaned forward, his eyes sharp. "Ah yes. What does that cursed, rather nondescript piece of metal do? It tricks fate, Fabian Prewett. It splits that which should be whole. It creates second options."

"I don't understand." Mad Eye finally spoke, staring at Quidel.

"Alastor, it breaks time."

"I still don't understand!"

Dumbledore cut in. "Think of time as one long, two dimensional plane. The Iron of Babylon has a terrible curse on it. By releasing this curse, you will break this plane into two. Time will have broken into two sections, each with its own possibilities. In other words, we have two alternative realities."

A long silence thrummed away after his proclamation.

Finally,

"Are you saying that Voldemort broke time to create two alternate realities? You mean to say there is another reality running parallel to ours?" demanded Lily, her heart beating painfully.

"Yes." replied Quidel calmly, with the air of answering an invitation to dinner.

"Why?" asked James weakly. "What made him do that?"

Sirius however swivelled to face Quidel. "You said... You said fifteen years. When was this curse unleashed?"

"Roughly fourteen years ago."

Emmeline Valance broke through the collectively drawn breaths and hisses. "What happens when the curse runs its course?"

"The two realities merge to become one. The crack repairs and the two worlds collide and mesh together."

"And?" demanded Mad Eye, his voice rising. "What the fuck happens when the worlds collide?"

Quidel sighed. "Normally, hell would unleash. You can imagine the catastrophe. Two worlds, completely different due to circumstantial changes, would collide and nobody would understand what's going on. The dead in one world would come alive from the other. Those who live in both worlds are the ones who will face the major brunt of the healing of the break. There will be physically only one of the person, but their minds will have two alternative versions of the last fourteen years playing in their conscience."

"What do you mean?" whispered Sturgis.

"It's like two transparency sheets placed one on top of the other. That which is present in one and absent in the other will be finally present in the final meshing. But the ones who are there for both will overlap. For instance, you Sturgis, lived in the other reality. When the worlds collide, there will be only one of you, but you also bear an extra set of memories worth fourteen years pertaining to the other reality."

James hissed out in horror. "That's mind fucking, literally!"

"Exactly." agreed Dumbledore. "It can play with one's minds if the situations in both the worlds are drastically different."

Lily was looking at Quidel intently. "You were in the other reality, were you not?"

Quidel nodded. "It's one of the powers I possess as Guardian. I traverse across the realities. I chose the other reality because it was safer for me and my existence was of importance as someone needed to warn you. The worlds meshing and nobody knowing what was happening would've been a complete disaster. Atleast you won't go into shock on suddenly having a very intrusive and different set of memories playing in your head, conflicting with the original."

He looked around at them. "And now, I have chosen this reality to divulge the truth. It makes more sense to do it here as the Order is intact."

"Why? Isn't the order intact there?" asked Frank fearfully.

Quidel looked at Dumbledore. "I think, Albus, this is your story henceforth."

Sirius however, oddly enough, had a grin on his face, unlike the rest of them who looked fatigued and petrified.

"Why did he do it fifteen years ago?" he asked casually, his eyes glued to Dumbledore.

Albus looked at him sharply and realized that Sirius Black had unknowingly grasped at the shadow of the truth.

"This is where I come clean." Albus told them with a sigh. He braced himself for the reaction to his next statement.

"Fifteen years ago, I lied to all of you about why Voldemort came after Bella Potter and Neville Longbottom."

Dumbledore refused to look up and meet their stricken expressions. He knew that James, Lily, Sirius and Remus never spoke Bella's name in the last fourteen years. Alice and Frank had struggled just as much but Alice had gotten pregnant with Natasha eventually and

the second child had managed to assuage their pain slightly. In a single sentence, Albus knew he had ripped open an unhealed wound that they had forcibly covered and determinedly pretended did not exist.

Albus ploughed on, knowing that the only way to keep them from getting up and walking off or even keep them from throwing something at him, would be to continue.

"I told you that Voldemort wanted vengeance because you had defied him. While there is no uncertainty that Voldemort is a crazed, cruel man, there was a reason why he was specifically after the two of them, especially Bella, that had nothing to do with evening out scores."

"What are you saying Dumbledore? What is this?" James's harsh voice lashed out in his ears. Lily hand gripped her husband's arm tightly, her eyes wide, her lungs refusing to take in oxygen. Frank and Alice looked at Dumbledore, pale and horrified. Remus blinked at him, disbelief written across his face. Tonks, Kingsley and Mad Eye stared at the them, looking wary and alarmed. The others just looked at him in slack jawed confusion. Only Sirius remained expressionless, almost expectant.

"There was a prophecy made. I will not tell you the details because it is the last weapon we have against Voldemort and I think it best that its specific contents remain with me alone. The general gist of the prophecy is that a child born at the end of July would have the power to vanquish Voldemort and this child would be born to parents who defied him thrice."

Frank twitched violently. "We did... before Neville was born... As did James and Lily... He thought... And both the kids were born July end... I remember... he..."

He broke off unable to finish. His eyes blazed with fury. "He killed our children because he thought those little helpless babies would get him?"

Dumbledore nodded grimly. "There's more to the prophesy, which essentially states that by the dark lord would mark this child as his equal. In essence, Voldemort would create his destroyer. Had he known this part of the prophesy, he would've desisted from killing

them immediately and waited while they grew up, before picking the child he thought would be most likely to challenge him. But Severus Snape heard only the first half before I hurled him out of the building. He immediately relayed what he heard to his master, who immediately started checking records and zeroing in on the possible children."

"Severus?" whispered Lily weakly, mentioning her long dead best friend's name for the first time in years. Next to her, James' face was a mask of cold fury.

"He didn't know it would finally lead to you Lily." Dumbledore defended his now dead spy. "He was just doing his job as a death eater. When, however, he did realize that Voldemort intended to go after you, he rushed to me and told me what had transpired. He became a double agent and as you know, he died ten years ago on being discovered. He remained faithful to the Order till he breathed his last Lily."

"It doesn't matter!" spat out James. "What he did... Nothing absolves him of that crime!"

Dumbledore sighed. "James..."

"It doesn't matter." James cut across, his voice flat and cold. "He killed them and the prophecy doesn't hold good. Moving on..."

"Not quite, James." Dumbledore said quietly.

Quidel spoke up. "You see James, Voldemort became paranoid when he heard about the prophecy. It drove him to come looking for us again, this time to destroy us and take possession of the Iron. For all his menacing bravado, Lord Voldemort is the biggest coward in existence when his supremacy is threatened. He has done the unthinkable to ensure his immortality, but the prophecy shook him nevertheless. He wanted to take no chances. That's when he decided to come to possess the Iron. He was determined to win, no matter the cost."

"He created the alternate realities to ensure his continued survival. He halved the probability, gave the prophecy a 50-50 chance of being realized." explained Dumbledore.

"And?" whispered Remus, refusing to let the hope swelling inside of him overwhelm him. "Is that what happened?"

Quidel nodded, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Yes. He did it perfectly, I have to give that to him. You see, to unleash the curse, you need to find a factor that will sway, a variable in the equation. And there was one, set perfectly in his reach. Peter Pettigrew."

"Voldemort knew that Pettigrew would be the perfect person to unleash the curse. Granted, the man was a confirmed death eater and a spy, but he was fickle. And more importantly, would he go as far as to hand over his best friend's toddler to save his skin?"

"And he didn't... In the other reality... He stayed true?" The plea in James' voice was evident to every single person. He was a marauder somewhere inside then? Even after everything he did? For the first time in all those years, he allowed Wormtail into his mind and prayed for his old friend.

Dumbledore looked at him sadly. "I wish I could say that James, but it wasn't like that. The realities were divided by Peter, but not by the polarity of his decision. He betrayed you in both the existences. It was the manner of his betrayal that made the difference."

Sirius let out a bitter laugh. "Of course, the rat. I should've guessed. For a moment I almost thought there was some hope for him after-all."

"In this reality, he made sure all of you were out of the house and handed Bella to Voldemort directly. Obviously, there is nothing a toddler could do against him and she was killed. Neville was also murdered because Voldemort wanted to tie up all loose ends. In the other reality, his betrayal was more absolute so to speak. He allowed Sirius to remain the public face of the Potter's secret keeper, while he assumed the actual role. And he didn't hand in Bella. He gave all of you away. James, Lily and Bella were in the house when Voldemort attacked."

Remus buried his face in his hands, eyes squeezed shut. Sirius looked at Quiddell anguished while Lily and James just listened, pale faced.

"James was killed on the spot, while Lily ran upstairs with Bella, trying to find a way out. Voldemort found them anyway. At this point I should explain that Severus had pleaded with Voldemort to spare Lily. Voldemort agreed, as a reward for Severus's loyalty and he was willing to let Lily go untouched. Only James and Bella were not expected to survive."

Lily tightened her grip painfully on James hand, who reciprocated unconsciously. Both of them forced the terrible image of him dead while she held their baby upstairs, trying and failing to get away, from their minds as they struggled to endure the brutality of the tale.

"Lily didn't allow herself that chance. She pleaded with Voldemort, telling him that she would do anything if he would just spare her daughter. Voldemort finally killed Lily, who stood between the murderer and her daughter. He then pointed his wand at Bella."

"STOP!" roared James, having had enough. "What are both of you playing at? Do you think this is some sort of entertainment? Shut up! This has gone far enough!"

Lily looked at the table top, unseeing and trapped with images of new horror. Remus stood up along with James, tight lipped and angry.

But it was Sirius who cut through the tension, his tone almost mild and clinical.

"Bella survived didn't she? He couldn't kill her. She realized the prophesy."

"Yes." whispered Quidel, agonized by the misery he was inflicting with is tale.

James swayed on his feet, Remus reaching out to steady him, looking at Quidel wide eyed.

"Please don't." pleaded Lily, tears in her eyes. "Don't do this... Don't make us believe what can never be..."

"She survived Lily. Bella is the Chosen one. Voldemort couldn't kill her. His curse rebounded off her and hit him instead."

"How?" demanded Tonks, suddenly on her feet as well, fierce. "Nobody survives the killing curse!"

However Alice broke in, a wild smile playing on her lips. "Because of Lily! She sacrificed herself! An old protective charm...A very powerful one!"

Dumbledore nodded at her. "Exactly. Lily's sacrifice endowed Bella with protection that even the killing curse couldn't break."

The entire room fell silent, absorbing the dramatic turn of events, wondering if this was some sort of bizarre dream.

"What happened then? Did he die?" Emmeline finally asked.

"He disappeared. No, he didn't die. But he vanished without a trace. It has been an era of peace in the alternate reality." Quidel replied, rubbing his eyes.

Mad Eye watched Quidel. "Why Bella? He seems so sure it's her. He based his entire mad plan on the factors around her. Why not Neville? The boy was pureblood and by Voldemort's own twisted beliefs, he should logically be the one to destroy him."

"Because he could see himself in her. She was half-blood like him. Somehow, even through his normal foolish layer of delusion, he saw something in that child that reflected him. Instinct told him she would be the one, not the pureblood child."

"Reflected in her?" spat James. "The psychotic bastard!"

"Oh you'll be surprised James." replied Quidel thoughtfully. "Voldemort reacted to the mere similarities in their blood at that time, but he turned out to be more correct than anyone could've dreamed. Anybody who knew Voldemort in his younger days, before he turned into his older, evil form, are more often than not, stunned by the similarities between the two. Both of them are incredibly good looking and in an almost identical fashion; similar tendency to attract trouble. They both have the ability to draw people to them- magnetic personalities. Both of them are probably the only Parseltongues to have set foot in Hogwarts in many years. Both were raised in terrible conditions, though Voldemort was more dismal than cruel. In all fairness, if anyone has the right to be despotic, it would probably be

Bella. She was the one mistreated, abused and she's definitely stronger of the two. They both had, from the time they were infants, seeds of darkness sown in them... And..."

He stopped midsentence at the expression on James, Lily, Sirius and Remus's face.

'Information overload.' he realized. 'Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to tell them how she's so much like Voldemort or mention to her very Gryffindor parents about her Parseltongue abilities. Or about her being abused. Or even the fact she has the ability to flip to the dark side. It's the sort of thing parents don't usually want to hear about their daughters.'

James Potter looked at him, his eyes very dead and suddenly, he looked a hundred years old.

"I think, you better tell me everything that's happened to my baby girl. Don't spare me the details. I prefer to have a heads up so that I can systematically murder every single fucking asshole who did this to her. Start talking."

It's going to be a longer conversation that Dumbledore anticipated. I can only hope we have enough Calming Draught. And also, I better warn Sirius to get out of here, well out of James and Lily's reach.

Sirius traced his tongue over Bella's bottom lip, smiling as she groaned in impatience. It was the day of the final task and both of them were in Hagrid's currently empty hut. Remus and Sirius were in Hogwarts, officially invited over as family of one of the champions. Remus was catching up with his old students, Ron and Hermione in tow. They had given Sirius and Bella space, innocently assuming they would need some Godfather-Goddaughter time, to soothe their nerves. It was an assumption that the two did nothing to dissuade, and on discovering that Hagrid would be very busy in the maze, setting up the monsters he was contributing, they decided to 'distract' themselves from the stress.

Sirius was leaning against the headboard of the massive bed, with Bella on his lap, with her pants off, clad in her t-shirt and knickers. Sirius traced the waistband with his thumb and groaned as she

pressed herself harder on to him. He wondered how he had managed to restrain himself from just ripping off her clothes and making love to her. His concern over her age was alarmingly low when she was in a mood like this. Her hands traced patterns on his skin, her fingers running over the healed scars on his back.

She suddenly pulled back from his embrace. "So... What do I get as reward for becoming the Triwizard Champion and being alive against all odds?"

He snorted. "Nice try. If you think that's going to make me cave in and promise sex, you have something else coming."

She scowled. "Why are you being such a saint? I know I want it! I can safely assume you want it because thirteen years with the Dementors is like an iron clad celibacy statement. Unless..." she narrowed her eyes at him. "You aren't getting off with some hooker are you?"

Sirius groaned. "I hate it when you become such a girl and get all stupidly presumptuous! Of course not! If you must know I'm wanking off imagining you. There! I hope you're happy now that I've admitted my miserable reason for control!"

"That's flattering." she told him, dispassionately.

"Bella... not now. I'm barely holding it in. Don't make this difficult." Sirius drawn tone rang with suffering.

Bella cocked her head to one side and looked at him for a minute before grinning devilishly. She leaned forward and snaked her arms and legs around his body tightly and sucked on his neck, her fingers tugging his black hair. Sirius lost it. His expression wild, he wrenched her away from him and pulled her shirt over her head. He pushed her down on his bed and kissed her hard, capturing her cry of surprise in his mouth. His hands caught in her hair and he pulled hard, forcing her lips harder against his. His hands made its way down and stopped as his fingers made contact with the silver band around her neck. His head snapped up and stared at the necklace.

"WHY are you still wearing this?" he asked slowly. Bella recognized the danger in his voice immediately. Uh oh...

"I like it. It's very me. Part Gryffindor, part Slytherin...reflects the irony of my existence. " She hoped the truth would work and he would leave it at that, in vain.

He narrowed his eyes at her. "I see. And it just so happens Zabini gave that to you. No big deal."

She sighed irritably. "Sirius stop it. The whole jealous schoolboy act is tiring. It has nothing to do with the fact that Blaise gave it to me. I really like it al-right?"

Sirius pushed her off him angrily. Bella glared at him. "Fine. Go to hell." She irritably pulled her shirt back on and started looking for her jeans and robes. Sirius continued to lean against the headboard, fuming and giving her the evil eye. Bella was careful not to meet his eye. She knew she would freak out at his expression and she was not willing to admit defeat in their minor war.

"Come back here." he said slowly.

Bella scowled. "I'm not your fucking property for you to toss aside and reclaim whenever you please. I'm leaving." She finally found her jeans under the foot of the bed and reached for it. Sirius's arm snaked around her waist and pulled her back roughly against him. "I said COME HERE."

"And I said I'm leaving. Get your hands off me."

His response was to cup her breasts roughly while his teeth grazed her ear. Bella bit her lip. Why do I always cave into his stupid, possessive, animalistic behaviour? Why can't I ever enforce some civil conversation with reasoning, like normal people?

His hands slid inside her knickers, touching her, driving all thoughts away from her head. They had never gotten this far before. If I had known all it would take was jealousy, I should've told him I've slept with Blaise. Keen on testing her theory, she said out aloud.

"Huh. Blaise did that better."

For a startled moment, she thought Fang had come into the hut. Then she realized all that furious growling was Sirius. He flipped her

over on to the bed, his expression dangerous. Oh... Cripes... I think I may have taken it too far with that... Fuck Fuck Fuck...

He pressed her down with the weight of his body and drove his fingers inside her. She cried out in surprise and pain. He watched her coldly as he continued to work her. She writhed in pleasure and pleaded with him but he continued with his ministrations, his expression hard.

He leaned his head down and pressed his lips against her ears. "Just get out of the maze you damned wench. I'll show you why the women flock to Sirius Black." The promise in his voice made her wish the accursed evening was already over.

Severus was no stranger to melancholy or helplessness. But this was the first time in years he felt it encase him so tightly. The last time had been when he realized the Dark Lord was targeting Lily Evans. This time it combed his senses as he watched Bella Potter stand tersely in front of the maze entrance by Cedric Diggory, as she attempted light hearted conversation with Fleur Delacour behind her.

'First the mother, now the daughter. The whole damned family will be the death of me.' he thought grimly. He caught Albus's eye and glared at him balefully. He had spent the last two days biting down the pain emanating from his throbbing Dark Mark and arguing with Albus to pull Bella out of the tournament.

"I don't care how! Throw a seemingly critical curse at her! Fake her death! I don't know! But you can't let her do this Albus! Something is going to go terribly wrong! I just know it!"

Albus had looked at him wearily and told him, for the millionth time, that there was nothing he could do and if Bella could survive the first two tasks she would endure the third.

"The Dark Lord is up to something. Tonight is the night. Something awful is going to happen.' He thought, frustrated at his own doomsday predicting instinct.

The only one who seemed to share his sentiment seemed to be Black, who was seated next to Albus, his haunted gray eyes fixed on Bella, looking as though he wanted nothing more than to whisk her

away from this place. Severus never thought he would see eye to eye with Black on anything but now he felt like marching up to him and offering his assistance.

'Then again, she might be better off facing the Dark Lord than being alone with Black. Manipulative, sick bully. The selfish bastard will drag her into his filthy, hell hole with him.'

The task began and Bella disappeared from his sights. He fought down the groan and began his patrolling.

Time wore on and soon Delacour and Krum were retrieved. His blood ran cold at the sight of their prone forms. Delacour clearly looked like she had been hit by a dark curse. Krum looked dazed and out of focus. Like a victim of the Imperius curse.

His eyes met Dumbledore's, who had come down to the pitch, when the two of them had been pulled out. Hi horrified gaze held Severus's eyes and he felt a savage pleasure that Dumbledore finally had his own little Armageddon foretelling voice in his head. Both of them instinctively looked to the centre of the maze, where the cup stood, thinking the same thing.

They should have completed the task by now. Where the hell are Diggory and Potter?

The memory of an engorged spider withering in agony swam into her mind, as she struggled to regain her senses. The remnants of the Cruciatus Curse coursing through her body continued to throw her out of focus. She fought the exhaustion threatening to engulf her and focussed on a distant shape. As her retinas readjusted, she realized, to her utmost horror, the said shape happened to be Cedric's body. It snapped her back to where she was. At Voldemort's feet, her hands and feet bound; her wand in Wormtail's custody. She was transported to a time when she was younger and lay similarly helpless on the ground as Dudley and his friends edged closer, sneering.

I think it's written somewhere in the stars that I'm to spend my entire miserable life fighting bullies.

"Another round Bella?" jeered Voldemort, his masked cronies laughing with unnecessary enthusiasm. Her resistance to the Imperius Curse had alarmed them and it was clear that the sight of her screaming in agony as the Cruciatus worked on her brought utmost relief to the circle of deranged wizards.

Bella looked up into the snake-like face, surprised at her complete lack of fear. Then again, with the amount of hatred she felt for the disgusting creature in front of her, there was no place for any other emotion. Her lips curled and going with her usual reckless, suicidal behaviour gave into her urge to taunt him.

"Oh yeah baby... Give it to me. I won't fight your desire for satisfaction as you watch me scream, tied up and helpless, while you stand surrounded by your oh-so-powerful henchmen. We're all here to kiss your sorry ass after-all and humour you as you continue to think you're the Dark Side's gift to all of existence. Pathetic loser."

She almost laughed as the Death Eaters hissed in horror at her insolence. Voldemort's sneer vanished and his barely present nostrils flared. "Wormtail, untie her and give her back her wand. Let's see if this insufferable bitch is all talk or actually capable of putting up a decent fight."

Predictable. Bella let her wonder at his rather common-place egoistic behaviour occupy her mind and keep out the worry that stemmed from the fact that even if she did have her wand, she didn't have a clue as to how to defend herself. Wormtail hastily untied her,

refusing to meet her eyes. He placed her wand by her side and practically fled back into the circle.

Run all you want Wormy. One day, your blood will be mine to spill. I stopped Sirius and Moony from killing you and now, I will have the satisfaction of taking your sad, useless life when the time comes.

She raised her wand, racking her brain for options, each one less likely to work than the other.

Voldemort raised his wand. "Crucio."

Bella may not have had the magical ability to fight him, but pure instinct and reflexes pushed her to fall to the ground and roll behind Tom Riddle senior's tombstone. The curse hit the head of the grave, chipping a bit of the marble.

Voldemort laughed, his voice bordering on hysteria. She fought the urge to clamp her ears shut. He sounded like nails against a blackboard.

"Is that your brilliant defence strategy Bella? Hiding behind my father's tombstone, less than ten feet away?"

"Course not you evil idiot!" she replied tartly. She stuck her head out around the stone and threw a body binding curse. Voldemort swished his wand and one of his Death Eaters was summoned in front of him to take the curse. The cloaked figure crashed to the ground, his mask falling off, revealing stunned gray eyes and a curtain of platinum blonde hair.

"Wow Riddle! Many thanks! Been wanting to have a go at that git myself!" she called cheerfully, internally struggling to find a way out.

Voldemort's red pupils widened, torn between irritation and amusement at her nonchalance.

"Are you going to waste my time Potter? I'm not a big fan of cat and mouse games. Very unworthy behaviour of a Triwizard Champion, might I add."

The cup! Bella realized. It can get me back to Hogwarts! She mentally gauged the distance and realized she was going to have to make a mad dash for it.

Taking a deep breath, she threw herself out of the protection of the stone. Just as she anticipated, Voldemort's killing curse came hurtling her way. Ready for it, she dropped to the ground on her knees and it missed her by inches, going over her head. She sprung up and yelled "Stupefy!" Voldemort flicked his wand, diverting the curse and it hit another Death Eater in the circle. But Bella didn't give a break between the curses. She kept throwing curse after curse and she started to run towards the cup. "Impedimenta! Stupefy! Expelliarmus!"

Voldemort kept deflecting them till he realized what she was trying to do. "Potter! Do you really think I'm that stupid?" he drawled out, pointing his wand at the ground below her feet. It exploded, sending Bella sprawling into Cedric's corpse. She winced as she forced her body to lie flat, next to his, letting him take the impact of the killing curse thrown her way. The Death Eaters still standing started to regroup to prevent her escape and Voldemort advanced, a mad smile on his face.

On a sudden burst of inspiration, Bella raised her head over Cedric's chest and pointed to the Cup behind Voldemort. "Accio Cup!"

Before anybody could react, the cup soared to her hands just as she grasped Cedric's yellow jersey.

She could hear Voldemort's infuriated scream as she felt something jerk behind her navel.

Her head was buried in Cedric's chest as she fought nausea.

"Bella? Bella!" She felt someone grasp her shoulders and hold her torso upright. Someone hooked their fingers under her chin and forced her face up. Her wild eyes met Severus Snape's black terrified ones. "He's back." she whispered. "Resurrected by the loyal servant. Cedric... He killed Cedric."

Snape's expression mirrored her trauma. Another set of arms prised her fingers away from Cedric's jersey. "Couldn't leave him there..." she tried to explain, all the screaming and hysteria in background

distracting her. "They would've mutilated his body, the bastards. Wanted to bring Cedric back, keep him safe..." her voice died out as it dawned on her that Cedric was gone. He was someplace far away, where she couldn't protect him and keep him safe. Everything that her panic and survival instinct had kept bottled up since Cedric fell dead at her feet at the cemetery broke free and an anguished cry escaped her lips. She reached for Cedric, whispering, pleading for someone, anyone to save him. Thin bony hands pulled her away, murmuring gentle assurances in her ears. She looked at Dumbledore, unfocussed, vaguely aware of the crowd of people pressing around them and the cacophony of various voices, in various degrees of shock and horror. "Bella... Come with me. Let him go. You can't do anything. Let him go Bella."

He's already gone... And I'm still alive... It should've been the other way around.

She opened her eyes, having a fierce fight with her eyelids that seemed to want to stay shut. A light murmur reached her ears. She strained her senses to try and get a picture of what was happening over her prone form. She vaguely remembered being hauled to the hospital wing, and someone forcing a vial of Dreamless Slumber Potion into her hands. She fuzzily imagined it had been Snape, who hadn't left her side since she returned from the Graveyard of Hell, towing Cedric's body along with her. She wondered if she imagined the momentary blaze of fury in Snape as he fought off Moody who had been insisting she come with him.

Mad Eye Moody... Bella allowed her brain to process her memories of the ex Auror. She wondered if it was the effect of the horror of recent events but something about him unsettled her. She brushed it aside and forced her eyes open. Pine forest eyes met molten steel. Sirius... His handsome face was lined with worry and his tightened lips softened as she stared at him.

"You're okay..." he whispered, shaking.

Bella, who had spent her life alone and had presumed that anything within her that made her slightly human should have died by now, felt her heart break at his expression. For the first time, she opened her eyes, tired and injured, to face someone she loved, who wasn't Ron or Hermione. As she continued to stare into his eyes an odd

thought entered her head, which seemed a little out of context, even with her disorientation.

I want to wake up every single day, for the rest of my life, to this. My Sirius.

And for the first time in years, Bella cried with all the pent up feelings inside her shaking off their shackles. She wept as she realized the enormity of what happened last night. She wept as she realized that life as she knew it was officially over. Tears streamed down her cheeks as it occurred to her that she could never take everyone she truly cared about for granted anymore because all of them were in terrible danger from the monstrosity that had mercilessly killed her own parents and destroyed so many lives. And as she rested her head at the crook of Sirius's neck as he held her and whispered gentle assurances into her hair, she finally understood what fear tasted like.

And something told her, that one way or another, this was the beginning of the end. She held Sirius tighter as she contemplated what she had at stake. The warm, lean, muscular frame pressed to her only gave her one of the many in her list but it was enough for her to decide that this time, she would shield, like her mother, and protect them all with her life and take every blow that went their way.

Cedric will be the first and last person I couldn't save. You've marked your own death in your calendar by daring to kill good, decent people Voldemort. You've ensured that your death will be on my account, even if it means I go down with you.

Sirius entered the room, treading softly. It was the first time since her death that he had come in without some form of alcohol. His heart sang with hope and his lips upturned as he contemplated their unbelievable luck. He wondered if he should fold the crib and remove the toys littered in the room.

There needs to be room for a bed. A big one! And walls definitely need to be repainted. From what Quidel told us about her, she doesn't seem like the kind who'd go for a pink-girly sort of theme. Something Quidditch-centric! Blimey... she sounds better than her old man! Seeker since her first year!

He heard the door behind him creak open and he glanced over his shoulder to see James look on from the doorway, wide eyed. Speak of the devil...

Sirius respectfully stayed where he was. He knew that James had never even come to this part of the house in years since their world Bella had been killed. Lily and he had shifted their bedroom to another corridor, unable to bear being so close to this room. Sirius had taken up their old bedroom for precisely the same reason they moved away – to be closer to this room which was all that was left of her presence.

James took a tentative step forward, his eyes wandering and pausing at the toy broomstick that rested casually at the wall near the head of her crib. He swallowed hard.

"Wow... I used to be so stressed every time she got onto that thing and zoomed about. Was so sure she'd hurt herself." he said hoarsely. "And now... my baby's a Seeker for Gryffindor! Bloody glad I missed some of her matches, especially the ones against Slytherin. From what Quidel described, I'd have gotten a cardiac arrest if I had witnessed any of the fouls or the general shit that happens during these matches."

"You found them funny back when you used to play." remarked Sirius, with a smile.

James scowled. "I had a miserable sense of humour. Funny indeed! My poor Bella... Just let me get my hands on Marcus Flint!"

"Or Zabini Blaise!" added Sirius with a scowl, for some unfathomable reason, most irked by her dating the Slytherin than anything else Quidel had told him.

James nodded in agreement. "Hope she's still not seeing him. I'll personally break every one of his bones."

Sirius frowned thoughtfully. "He got pretty tight lipped about her... boyfriend thing... Maybe he decided best to keep mum after we started shouting when he told us about the Zabini thing eh?"

James snorted. "We'll know soon enough. And god save the bastard when I find out who it is."

James now stood next to Sirius and stared down at the crib, the blankets slightly ruffled, as though baby Bella had just been lifted from her crib to be kissed goodnight repeatedly by James, Sirius and Remus while Lily yelled at them furiously to let her poor baby sleep.

Sirius gazed at his best friend's hands, clenched so tight around the crib bars that his knuckles were white.

"James..." began Sirius.

James met his gaze, his eyes wide and haunted as they had been for the first few years after Bella's murder. "A second chance Sirius... A second chance to have her back. This never happens, even in the magical world! And yet... look at the cruelty of fate Paddy... She's Voldemort's namesis. My underage daughter is the most evil wizard's biggest problem. We could have her back just to lose her again. Neither I, nor Lily can handle that again."

Sirius's eyes blazed. "Nor can I. And it won't happen. We won't allow it. We're going to win Prongs. I know it. Bella isn't alone. We're going to finish him and Bella's going to make it through this time. We're all going to protect her!"

"We were supposed to have done that fourteen years ago too Padfoot." was his bitter reply.

"But there aren't any low- life, worthless, so-called friends this time Prongs." came Remus's quiet voice from the doorway.

The three Marauders looked at one another as the walls crashed to the ground. After fourteen years of pretending that everything was alright, they faced one another and their past.

James smiled darkly. "Wormtail is alive in their world, and the reason Voldemort is rising there. Looks like we have a chance to sit with Wormy and have a chat boys. We never did manage that before Voldy got him here, did we?"

"A nice long talk..." added Sirius. "I prefer to do it when I've merged with my counter-part. I'm sure twelve years worth of Azkaban

memories will add more... incentive to go ahead and give him a piece of my mind."

Remus smiled serenely. "Indeed. I have an entire questionnaire prepared in my head. I wonder of his answers are still as shifty and unsatisfactory as Professor McGonagall remarked after every exam."

"I should hope not. I look forward to eloquent replies that would convince us to spare his life after-all." James replied, his smile widening, his face almost unrecognizable in the chill of his expression.

Bella frowned as she took in the street Sirius had led her to. "Where are we?" she asked tiredly.

Sleep was becoming a nostalgic dream for her. Since Voldemort's return, her scar seared with red hot pain often and every night was a bad, often more bloodied version of 'The Return of Voldemort' rerun, as sleep evaded her. After her initial breakdown in the hospital wing, she distanced herself. She stayed aloof from everyone, including the Weasleys and Hermione. Sirius had grown despondent as he found it impossible to break through the concrete walls she built around herself. She never stayed in the same room as any of them, unable to take their anxious looks or as in the case of Moony and Molly, the constant fussing and cajoling to eat and 'get her strength back' or the ridiculously conspicuous attempts to sneak Dreamless Sleep potion into her food.

Her mood had only dipped steeper down as she pieced together the Mad Eye mystery. She bluntly conveyed her suspicions to Dumbledore, who apologetically told her he had realized the night of the Triwizard finals when he had tried too hard to take her away from his sight. Apparently, it had been Snape who had realized the truth and confronted him. The downside to it was that Bart Crouch Jr, souless thanks to Fudge the Fool and his Dementor whose leash hadn't been tight enough, was useless in a trial, only making Fudge persist with his mad accusations. It also, once and for all, sealed any possibility of Snape returning to Voldemort's side as spy for them because no well concocted story would assuage the Dark Lord's fury of having lost his most faithful follower. Bella has just given Dumbledore a disgruntled look and tossed a question over her shoulder as she left his office. "Isn't Mad Eye your friend? How did

Crouch manage to go an entire year passing off as him? A spy from Voldemort at our very midst even when the git was barely alive... Wonder what's going to happen now that he's back full force."

She would never know how much her words haunted the old man, who sat at his desk in the same position even as the night wore on.

It took a lot of insisting from Ron, Hermione, the twins and Ginny to get the adults to leave her alone. They knew her well enough to know that all this would only annoy her more than help her. The only place she could go without eventually wanting to kick everyone around her was Hagrid. For all his boisterous and often downright innocent inability to understand subtle mood changes, he seemed to have understood that Bella was not to be disturbed or asked anything. He merrily talked about Buckbeak who was hiding in the Forbidden Forest or waxed regret about the now extinct Blast Ended Skrewts (that news had been the only thing that had made Bella positively grin).

Her first violent reaction came courtesy Rita Skeeter, whose article reported Fudge's insistence that Bella Potter was a lying, attention seeking whore and that Dumbledore was an old fool to go along with her lies and that it would be prudent to hold Bella for trial as prime suspect in Cedric Diggory's death. Hermione had been the first to read it and warned them all not to tell Bella (who was lost in her own world and far away from anything any news paper had to say) anything.

Sirius, who did read it, was in state of absolute fury and it had taken Bill Weasley and Remus to physically hold him down to prevent him from storming into the Daily Prophet's office to throttle Skeeter.

"Stop it Sirius!" bellowed Remus, finally snapping. "Grow up will you? Have you seen Bella the last few days? She's dying! Something is eating away at her and on top of it Voldemort is back! We don't need any more trouble, especially from you! Do you have any idea what it'll do to Bella if you land yourself back in Azkaban? Fudge is all but waiting for a reason to get us all there!"

Sirius stopped struggling, but the fury scrawled on his face remained, unchanged in its intensity.

Bella however, just walked in, returning from lunch at Hagrid's. She looked at all the guilty, shifty faces around her for a minute and realized they were hiding something from her.

"Bellsey!" chirped George. "Guess what we did to Ferret Malfoy today? Best prank we pulled off all year!" Fred and Ron nodded on either side of him, overdoing their excitement, their heads blurring with the speed of the movement. Hermione and Ginny staged a loud conversation about Flitwick who had taken to randomly throwing Cheering Charms around because he was of the opinion that the general mood in the castle upset him.

Bella simply looked down and spotted the Prophet lying on the floor, where Sirius had thrown it down in his rage.

"Accio." She said quietly, the paper zooming to her hand. Her eyes scanned the article and they waited with bated breath. The expression on her face remained neutral and her eyes, blank. Even her hands were limp. Fred and Ginny exchanged a nervous glance. Frightened, as they had been of her reaction, Bella not storming and abusing right now was far more scary. Bella stunned them all by sitting down cross legged on the floor. She spread the paper open on the floor in front of her, her expression still completely mild, almost blank. She neatly smoothened out the wrinkles and creases and looked at the article.

"Bella?" whispered Molly, taking an uncertain step forward, suddenly afraid for the girl's sanity. Bella then reached out and tore the paper neatly into two halves. She systematically tore each half into quartets and continued to do this till all that was left of the paper was a small pile of tiny pieces of printed paper. She pulled out her wand, pointed it at the pile and muttered. "Infero Retancus."

The papers shrivelled and glowed like embers. She then conjured a small glass box and transferred the glowing paper ash into it. Snapping it shut, she put it into her robe pockets and got up.

"Bella?" Ron asked finally. "What are you keeping that for?"

"Saving it for when I meet Skeeter. I want to shove this into her eyeballs and blind her. I think I'd very much like to hear her scream as her eye balls melt with the heat from her own filth. I bet it's shrill and annoying, like Voldmort's laugh." She strolled out of the room,

her face still completely neutral, missing the horrified expressions on everybody else's.

Dumbledore, on hearing about the incident from an almost-hysterical Remus, decided that Bella needed to go home with him and Sirius, breaking off for her vacation earlier than the rest of the school.

And that was what had lead her to stand in the dingy lane in the heart of London, a distant flowering bush the only sign that heralded the ongoing spring. Sirius stood next to her, his arms around her waist, his other hand clutching her trunk.

"Well, now that Voldemort shares your protection, it would enable him to access your Aunt and Uncle's house as the blood protection will not keep him out any longer. The apartment is too easily accessible and susceptible to attacks. So we're moving to my parents' old place."

"You mean the house you ran away from?"

"Yeah. I have to warn you though. It's been empty for years, since my mum died and the place is a mother-ship for all objects dark and freaky. It's your ultimate scary house, so to speak. Plus it's going to be filthy as hell. But it's safe from external attacks because my mental parents put very charm and protection on it possible. As the last remaining member of the Black family, I can access it. It's a good place to hide, provided what's inside the house doesn't kill us."

"Charming."

A ghost of a grin flitted across his face. "Shall we? I'm secret keeper by the way. And here we go." He bent his head in a conspiratory manner, his lips brushing her ear. " The current residence of Sirius Black, Remus Lupin and Bella Potter is Number 12, Grimmauld Place."

Author's Note:

As one of my reviewers dhh pointed out, with no breaks or markers indicating when the story changes or moves between the realities, it makes for difficult reading. I did put markers, stars, page breaks and what-not but FF is very, very moody and sometimes it shows, sometimes it doesn't. For instance, when I first published the story, I would use a '*' to indicate a shift between major scenes or realities. When that stopped appearing in the published version, I started using page breaks. When I initially published the previous chapter, it was very much there. 24 hours later it had vanished... Like I said, FF tends to be a bit cranky.

So henceforth, I'll use the '!!!!!!' to indicate the story's movement into the AU. This chapter stays put in one Universe but nevertheless, I have used it somewhere in the middle to test it.

And since I hardly ever write any A/N's at the head of a chapter, I'll take this opportunity to thank my faithful reviews. Your feedback makes my day and even your criticism tends to be constructive and I truly appreciate it. I try my best to assimilate your pointers to improve my story and writing.

Also, a big thank you to all those of you who have added me to your Fav Story/Author Listing. I'm absolutely honoured! :)

And a big shout out to all those of you who've subscribed to the Story Alert. It feels great to know that you would want to follow up on the Fic.

I would also like to apologize for the typos and occasional error. I'm not in habit of proof-reading what I write and yes I do know how incredibly stupid it is to publish something without as much as glancing through it again, especially considering I write when I should be asleep ^_~ So please, please, please overlook the few odd errors.

And on with the chapter! Cheers! :)

!!!!!!!

The ancient couch sagged under their weight. They sat on either edge of the ragged, once-upon-a-time regal piece of furniture, a very

pregnant pause seated between them. Sirius and Bella had spent the last three days 'cleaning' up No.12, Grimmauld Place and were exhausted from fighting with the extrordinarily nasty defences the house kept throwing back at them. They just broke off whenever they were overpowered and crashed on random, relatively cleaner surfaces around the kitchen. And they had managed the feat without a single word exchanged between them. Bella, preoccupied with obsessing over Voldemort and Cedric's death, had spiralled into an abyss of self despair and potential battle strategies. Sirius, lost in his own whorl of horror and memories, inclusive of the very clear recollection of stumbling into Godric's Hollow to find James and Lily dead. Added to his own terror, Bella's silence only worsened his apprehension. He knew she was losing herself to something unbidden inside and had no idea how to reach out to her. He wished Moony would return soon and get through to her and hated himself for not being able to do what he was sure Remus could. Bella was his soulmate and at the moment she could've been another face in the crowd at Lester Square on New Years' Eve with all the walls she had around her.

Sirius took a deep breath and winced at how loudly the wind whooshed into his lungs. He grit his teeth and proceeded to utter the first words of conversation between them in days. "I think, we better move up to the higher floors and start clearing a room for ourselves. The couches are not helping my already frugal sleep; Nor is the kitchen counter. And I'd really like a locked door between Kreacher and myself."

Bella shrugged vacantly. "He keeps to himself in that closed shelf under the sink. I don't know why you get so riled up at him."

"You wouldn't be so cavalier in your dealing with him if he kept muttering about how you're a mad mass murderer, a blood traitor and your mother's lament."

"No, I suppose not. Any idea why he's so genial with me? I may be the Girl-Who-Lived, but I'm a filthy halfblood. Shouldn't I be high on his harassment list?"

It had been a complete mystery to Sirius as to why Kreacher did not take off on Bella. He certainly didn't like her, but there was a clear sense of respect when he addressed her and was more likely to listen to her. In fact, he had taken to holing himself up only after

Bella told him, politely, to stay out of their way if he couldn't keep his opinions on Sirius to himself.

Sirius stretched out, relieved that Bella was actually talking. He hesitated, then held out his hand for her to take. She got up without touching him, her eyes averted and focussed on the stairs leading up. She quietly trod upstairs, leaving Sirius below, his hand still stretched out, angry and upset.

Fuck you, Bella. What the hell is your problem? I'm fucking dying here! I need you!

Sirius stomped up after her, his heavy footsteps sending clouds of dust a feet up in the air. He wanted to shake her, hit her, kiss her. He wanted to force a reaction out of her and break that blank mask she had taken to wearing since Voldemort's return. He furiously made his way up the corridor, following her dusty footprints, the thick carpet masking the sound of his arrival. He stopped short at the sight that greeted him. Bella stood in front of his old room, her fingers caressing the name plate that told her it was his room. The expression on her face was poignant with longing and her eyes glassy with unshed tears. She hadn't noticed him, standing barely ten feet away. Her lips parted to release a heavy sigh and she dropped her fingers. She continued on her way and reached the door to Regulus's finding it miraculously unlocked, she slipped inside, leaving him alone in the dark corridor, his own eyes teared up, in grief and relief at what he just witnessed.

Why won't you come to me? You still love me... Why are you pushing me away?

Instinct told him to leave her alone for the time being. He slipped into his room and looked around, smiling for the first time in weeks. His room was still resplendent with Gryffindor red and gold. His walls were covered with pictures of muggle automobiles and nude models. His smile slipped a bit.

Uh oh... Well... Nude models deem this room inappropriate for me to share it with Bella. She's cool but I think it'll border on insensitivity for us to share this bed. And given that mum wasn't able to take it down, the Permanent Sticking Charm I performed must've been mighty effective. Ha ha ha! Mum must've gone berserk! Go Sirius!

Infinitely cheered by the thought that he would've grated on his mother's nerves even while being completely absent, he stepped out and proceeded to Walburga and Orion Black's room. He cautiously poked his head in and blinked in surprise. The room was shockingly clean. The mirrors sparkled and the rosewood panelling gleamed in the dull light. At the centre of the surprisingly empty room, a large bed covered with black satin covers stood in magnificent glory, beckoning him.

Holy Shit... My parents actually had commendable taste when it came to doing up their personal space. None of the Black family artefacts and junk in here! And it's bloody squeaky clean. Looks like Kreacher has at-least kept his room of worship in undisputedly good condition.

Sirius was further cheered by imagining the expression on Kreacher's face when he found out that his beloved mistress's room would be occupied by her unworthy blood traitor son and his half-blood lover.

Ha! Up yours Kreacher!

Excited, he went out to find Bella. He knocked on Regulus's door impatiently.

"Come in." her soft voice floated out to him.

He strolled inside and found her sitting in the heart of Regulus's bed, dark green covers drawn up to her chin, leaning against the headboard behind her. She was staring at a photograph in her hand.

Sirius frowned and crawled up to sit beside and looked at the picture in her hands. It was a picture of the Slytherin Quidditch team, with Regulus seated silent and proud at the centre of the first row, looking true to his quiet personality.

"He was a Seeker..." Bella murmured, her fingers tracing his brother's outline. Sirius tried not to scowl at the way she sounded so approving and as if she shared something with his stupid brother he could never have with her.

"Yeah." Sirius replied abruptly. "Never won a match against the Gryffindor team though."

"Hmmm." was Bella's absent reply, her eyes still riveted to his brother's mild face. "He looks a bit like you, but he's nothing like you is he?"

Sirius remained silent, unsure. Am I imagining it or does she sound almost glad he's not like me?

"What happened to him? Where is he now?" she looked at Sirius curiously as she awaited his response.

"Killed even before I went to Azkaban. He was a Death Eater." Sirius felt a savage, smug pleasure as he said the words. "My perfect little brother joined up with Voldemort, then panicked when he started living the between-the-lines part of the job contract and tried to flee. Presumably killed on Voldemort's orders." He waited with triumphant expectation for her response. All he got was a mild "I see."

Sirius wanted to snatch the photograph out of her hands and hex everything that belonged to Regulus to oblivion.

Clearing his throat, he said "I found us our room. Shockingly enough, my parents' sanctuary is fabulous! I'll get our stuff in immediately."

Bella looked away. "Good. I'm happy for you. You've always been one for the big rooms. I like this one. I hope Regulus's wardrobe has some space, but it's not like I have much stuff. Shouldn't be a problem to fit in one person's stuff." She slid off the bed and exited the room without looking back.

Which part of the phrase 'OUR room' bypassed your attention Bella? wondered Sirius, angrily clenching the dark green sheets, suddenly hating his brother and his room more than he ever did in his life.

Later that night, after an uncomfortably silent and hasty dinner thrown together by Bella, Sirius lay in the dark sheets in parents' room, wild with the girl across the corridor. He tried not to imagine her wrapped up in Regulus's comforter, asleep, oblivious to his agony.

What peace can my dead brother give her that I can't?

Bella lay huddled in the large bed, the dark green sheets twisting over her naked body. She hadn't bothered to dress, preferring to let the cold in the room seep through her skin and numb her nerve-endings.

She closed her eyes and regulated her breathing. She couldn't explain even to herself why she was drawn to her beloved Sirius's dead sibling but she found some sense of calm pervading the very Slytherin room. The photograph had captivated her. Regulus looked to be a younger, less handsome version of his brother. But there was something about him that drew her to him. His face, his serious expression...

Why did he become a Death Eater? Something tells me he's not the type, notwithstanding his views on blood status. And who killed him? What did he refuse to do? What was he thinking as he died? Did he regret his life and choices? Did he regret not running away with Sirius or even asking for his help to get out of the mess he had gotten himself into?

Bella wondered if she looked as lonely as Regulus did, even when surrounded by people.

Maybe that's why I can make peace with the part of him that lingers in this room.

Bella's thoughts strayed to Sirius. She wanted to run to him and bury herself into his arms. She had almost caved in when he said 'our room'. But she had held out and kept her distance.

I cannot let him close. I can't let anyone close. Voldemort will kill them just to get to me and I will be damned before I let him touch Sirius or the Weasleys or Hermione or Moony or Hagrid or anybody else. I failed Cedric. I won't allow anyone else to die just because they're around me.

The next few days continued the same way, with bare minimum conversation as Sirius and Bella struggled to make the house inhabitable. Together, they cleaned out a guest bedroom for Moony and continued to detoxify various closets and shelves. Kreacher occasionally made his appearance and muttered under his breath about how Sirius was good for nothing. Sometimes, Sirius would order him away, sometimes Bella would quietly ask him to leave

them alone. Sometimes, they let him remain, pretending to ignore him, grateful that the silence was being broken, even if it was by hateful whispers.

Voldemort's face morphed into Cedric's, his pleasant, handsome features distorted by rage and contempt "You killed me Bella. You let him finish me..."

"No..." she croaked out. "Cedric... Please..."

James and Lily Potter stood on either side of Cedric, their faces impassive, looking at her as if she were a complete stranger.

"Mum... Dad... Help me... You have to save Cedric..." she pleaded.

James raised his eyebrows. "You're the reason we died you know." Lily nodded in agreement.

Voldemort's shrill laugh sounded in her ears.

"Bella..." Sirius called. She spun wildly, looking for him.

"Sirius..." she sobbed. "Sirius where are you? Get away from here... Get away! He'll kill you!"

"Bella!" Sirius's voice sounded more insistent. Her eyes snapped open and she took a deep shuddering breath as she struggled to get her bearings right. It took almost a whole minute for her to realize that it had just been a dream. Sirius hovered over her, pale and anxious.

Just a dream. It's okay. Sirius is okay.

"Nightmare. No worries." she rasped out.

Sirius didn't say anything and waited till she was perfectly calm once more. She finally looked up and was startled to see the lust and fury in his eyes.

She suddenly realized that she was very naked under the covers that barely covered her. The top of her covers had slipped down, just about hiding her nipples. The sheet below her waist was tangled with her limbs, exposing long sections of her bare legs and slivers of

her hip and waist. His eyes brazenly roved the length of her body. She wanted him as much as he wanted her.

Suddenly and unreasonable angry, she snarled. "Get out!" She hated that she had to keep him away. She hated not being with him.

Sirius met her eyes and his expression hardened. The lust was overtaken by sheer ferocity.

"What the hell is your problem?" he asked in his calm tone, the one he employed before exploding.

"Just... Leave. You shouldn't be here." she replied coldly.

"This is my house. I'll be wherever the hell I want." His voice remained calm.

Bella grit her teeth, all her frustration and anger siphoned to fight his arrogance and his asshole behaviour. "Very well. I'll take my leave and find residence where I am the final authority Black."

She sat up and tugged the covers so that she was completely hidden behind them.

Sirius's face twisted into a sneer. "By all means, go ahead Potter. Should I inform the Dursleys of your intention to stay in their cupboard under the stairs for the summer?"

"It's none of your business where the hell I stay. Move." She tumbled out of bed and marched to the bathroom attached to the room.

Sirius stood up and towered over her for a second. He glowered frighteningly, then spun on his heel and stormed out. Bella fought tears. She wished he would fight her and force himself on her. She wanted him to take her away so that she didn't have to make the choice to stay away from him to keep him safe. She wanted no choice in the matter because that made her responsible and where Sirius Black was concerned, it was the last thing she wanted to be.

Blinded by her tears, she stumbled into the shower. She purposely set the knobs so that ice cold water sprayed over her body. She stood shivering under the cold assault, tears mingling with the freezing rivulets, forcing herself to endure it as punishment for

treating Sirius badly; for letting Cedric die; for allowing Wormtail to live; for not dying instead of her parents;

!!!!!!

Bella slipped out of the house quietly, careful not to wake Mrs Black's portrait or Sirius up. It was barely five in the morning and she took the opportunity to steal out of the house. She had spent hours in the cold shower the previous night, robbing herself of any scope for sleep, claustrophobic in the darkness of the Black's ancestral home. She felt another pang of guilt as she thought about how much it must be killing Sirius to live here again.

She pulled her single layer of clothing – a thin long sweater top that almost reached her knees- tighter around herself. The air was chillier than she had expected. She made her way to the street corner and spotted a newspaper kiosk. She dug into the sweater pockets to extract the muggle money she had hastily thrown in and bought herself a copy of the Guardian. She then made her way to a coffee stand and on picking up a steaming mug of cappuccino, seated herself in a bench by a small park and lost herself in the news for the day. She found it to be a relief to be worked up about muggle issues like oil price hikes, Labour's digs at the Tories, Liverpool losing to Newcastle and share prices, putting away other worries like Voldemort out of her mind. She was so completely immersed in the paper and her coffee that she was startled when she felt a hand at her shoulder.

She jumped in alarm and looked up to meet a very disapproving Remus Lupin, his face bearing a heavy scowl.

"What in the blazes are you doing outside by yourself?" he hissed, uncharacteristically furious. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is? And where's your jacket? It's too cold to be wearing just that!"

Muttering furiously, he pulled out his robe and threw it over her, and dragged her down the street, back to Grimmauld Place.

"Er... welcome home?" Bella piped up, tentatively.

Remus glared at her. "I'm going to kill Sirius! He can't even keep an eye on you properly. The drunken sod."

"He's not drunk!" Bella protested, irritated by his tirade against Sirius. "And please don't tell him. We're already fighting and he doesn't know I'm not in the house."

"Excellent. This keeps getting better and better!"

He tapped his wand against the knob and the heavy door groaned open. They were instantly greeted by a patter of footsteps hurrying towards them and Mrs Black's portrait taking up its usual hysterical rant about people who befouled her family home.

Sirius's ashen face turned to her.

"Where the hell have you been?"

Remus faced him angrily. "Can't you do anything properly Sirius?"

The rest of the day was spent in angry silence, Remus, Sirius and Bella having broken out into an explosive fight and consequently locked up in their respective rooms, soaked in varying degrees of petulance and guilt.

Bella carefully made her way down to the kitchen and peeked in. She was relieved to find only Moony there, bent over some parchment, his brows furrowed.

"I'm sorry." she said in a small voice.

Moony looked up and his eyes softened. He pulled her into his arms and held her in a fatherly embrace. "It's al-right. I'm sorry for shouting too. I was just so scared thinking of what might have happened if any Death Eaters had found you there, helpless and alone..."

He shook his head and pulled back, holding her by her shoulders. "I have to leave now. I'm helping Dumbledore assemble the Order of the Phoenix once more. Grimmauld Place is the chosen HQ and you'll be seeing plenty of people soon, so don't worry. I have to leave again. Take care of yourself and Sirius okay?"

She nodded numbly, looking unhappy. "You just got here... And you're leaving already."

"I'll return soon Bella. I promise." He kissed her on her forehead and left.

Bella silently piled some of the food Moony had cooked onto a plate and went to Sirius's room. She knocked and waited for him to reply. "Come in." He called gruffly.

She went in to find him sprawled on his bed, looking lost. He stared at her. "Where's Moony? What are YOU doing here?"

Bella shrugged. "He's left again. I got you your food. You didn't eat lunch either."

"And you care? I'm touched."

"Whatever. I'm leaving it by the dresser. G'night."

"My break ends day after and I go back to work. I'd appreciate it if you didn't use my absence as a reason to get out of the house as you please."

She didn't reply, just turned to leave.

"Don't turn your back on me when I'm talking to you. I have given you an instruction. Is that clear?"

"Crystal." Was her curt reply, before she shut the door with a click and made her way back to her room.

She slipped back into the cold shower once more and let the tears run freely. She had no idea how long she stood there but she was finally broken out of her trance by the sound of her bathroom door clicking open. She stood still, knowing who was on the other side of the shower screen. The glass slid open to one side, to reveal a very haggard Sirius Black.

"I've been waiting for over an hour in your bed for you to come out." he whispered. He reached out and ran his finger down stomach and hissed as he felt the ice cold water droplets.

"Bella have you lost your mind? What are you doing?" he trailed off as he noticed her red eyes and swollen lips.

Sirius's eyes bore into hers and a sudden light of understanding filled his. It suddenly dawned on him, the reason for his aloofness, her anger, her shell. In that one moment, everything fell in place and he let out a long, aggrieved moan.

"You stupid, beautiful, masochistic girl..." he whispered. He stepped into the shower and slid the glass screen shut behind him. His arms snaked around her and he held her tight. Bella cried onto his chest as he rocked her gently. They slid down against the shower wall, the cold water soaking him as well. His lips sought hers and they kissed passionately. He pulled his t shirt over his head as she fumbled with his boxers. Both of them, naked and wet and cold and suddenly relieved to be in each other's arms, kissed and caressed one another.

Sirius reached out and shut off the shower. He gathered her in his arms bridal style and strode out of the bathroom and Regulus's room. He shut the door behind him and walked to his bed, where he laid her gently on the black sheets. He groaned at the sight of her naked body, her long wet tangled hair splayed around her head, streams of water making its way down the curves of her body.

"Sirius..." she pleaded. "Make love to me."

He didn't need to be told twice.

His lips trailed down her body, sucking at strategic places to draw the moisture into his mouth. Her hands trailed over his chest, back and tangling into his black hair. He ran his tongue over her nipples, causing her to moan and press his head closer to her breasts. His hands made their way down, between her legs. He pushed his fingers inside, one by one, preparing her for him. She whimpered and sighed in succession at his touch. He came back up and their lips met in a fiery tangle of their tongues. He was pressed up against her opening and their eyes met. Holding her gaze, he pushed himself inside her. She cried out in pain and Sirius held her and kissed her, staying still to allow her to get used to the sensation.

He slowly began to rock against her, the rhythm reaching to her core as she responded with moans of pleasure. "Bella Bella Bella..." he chanted as he kept driving into her.

Her back arched and her body pressed tight against him. "Sirius... I love you." She gasped out as he thrust particularly hard into her. He dipped his head to her bare shoulder and bit down hard. She cried out his name, only making him tighten his teeth's hold on her skin, ensuring that he kept the rhythm of his body thrusting into her steady. Her legs tightened around his waist and she sobbed his name as she came. Sirius followed soon after, his tongue lapping up the blood from his bite. He collapsed on top of her and he emptied into her, her muscled clenching around him and drawing him tighter and deeper into her.

Bella lay limp in his arms, her breathing slowly settling down. Sirius rolled to his side and pulled her into the circle of his arms.

"You are mine..." he whispered softly, running his fingers through her hair.

Bella smiled up at him. "I love you. I want to be only yours."

He hummed contently into her neck. "Two more years to go..."

"Two more years to what?"

"Till you're legally an adult. Then I can marry you."

Bella's jaw dropped and she pulled back to stare at him.

Sirius narrowed her eyes at her, one hand fondling her left breast, while the other hand trailed down her spinal chord. "What? I am marrying you! I'm going to make you my woman the first chance I get."

Bella continued to stare at him, an unreadable expression on her face.

"What are you thinking?" Sirius finally asked.

Bella gave him her James Potter grin. "I was just thinking that Bella Black has a nice ring to it."

Lily stared at James and Sirius in astonishment. "Co-Heads of the Department of Law Enforcement?" she gasped out. They grinned at her. Behind them Remus was doing something that might've resembled a war-victory dance if it didn't look so oddly dignified. Then again, it was Remus.

Lily squealed in delight, displaying a frivolity that had remained dormant for years. She threw herself in both Sirius and James's arms and all but strangled them in her excitement.

"Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!" she trilled. "I know it's not the time or moment to revel in personal achievements with a war going on but I AM SO PROUD OF YOU TWO!"

"Ah Lily Flower..." choked Sirius. "Loosen the grip darling. Not breathing is going to get in the way of me showing up tomorrow to bully all my subordinates."

James roared with laughter as she squeezed Sirius tighter making him splutter and gasp.

Lily grinned and let go. She turned to James. She drew him into her arms and gave him a long, searing kiss which he returned enthusiastically.

"He gets all the sugar while I get attempts on my life!" complained Sirius, nudging them both doing his best to disrupt their kiss. James paused long enough to look up and say "It's my reward for putting up with her pre-wedding hysteria as her loyal husband-to-be, all those years ago. And also for sharing a bed with her for sixteen years in spite of the fact that she hogs the entire blanket."

"What does she get for putting up with... well... you?" asked Remus with a grin.

"Thank you, Moony." Lily said as she surfaced momentarily this time.

Sirius snorted with laughter as James let go of Lily to run after Remus, waving his fists threateningly.

Lily smiled as she watched the men in her life act like they hadn't aged a day since they stepped out of Hogwarts to face the real world. And as always, she was grateful for that. But off-late, their

ribbing and madness had taken a lighter tone, like it really was Hogwarts all over again. Like the war outside never existed. Lily knew it was because of the giddy anticipation of having their life truly fixed again. The men were never expressive enough to ever say it, but the thought of having Bella back had returned them to exuberant life. And if they had any uncertainties about it, they hid them well, just like she did.

Lily had wondered, more often than not, if her daughter would willingly slip into her life with them, as though the last fifteen years never happened. She tried not to dwell on her daughter's horrid childhood. Every time she thought about it, she invariably broke whatever she held in her hand and had to restrain the urge to storm down to her sister's house and kill all three of them.

'Come home Bella...' thought Lily sadly. 'Just come to us and we'll make everything alright again baby. And we'll murder Petunia and her family in any way you choose.'

Even though she never knew her daughter, Lily had an awful feeling of dread that stemmed from her fear that Bella would not take them in with open arms.

"Lils?" James waved his hand in front of her, snapping her out of it. She focussed her attention back on him and felt pride swell at the sight of his wicked smile under his unruly mop of hair.

'We'll be okay.' Lily thought with determination. 'James and I can be parents once more and make up for everything we've missed as she grew up on her own. We'll never let her be alone any more. And Siri and Remmy can be the doting uncles they never had the chance to be. We'll be okay. We'll pull through this. I know we will.'

"Dumbledore wants the order to converge tonight." Remus told them, frowning as he scanned a piece of parchment with Dumbledore's loopy handwriting which Fawkes had dropped off when Lily had zoned out. His frown deepened. "He says... Quidel wants to say goodbye."

They stared at him. They remembered what Quidel had told them the night he had come into their lives to change it forever.

I die as the curse comes to a close. My end is your beginning.

The four of them silently looked at one another. It was time.

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Remus and Bella looked at one another edgily as they pretended not to notice Sirius snarling and spitting out curses at the Daily Prophet in his hand across the large, ornate table. It had been a tense two weeks with the Prophet going all out on their attack on Dumbledore and Bella. There wasn't a day when a snide remark or two, if not a full blown article, taking shots at either of them made its appearance on the front page. Bella was of the opinion that it wasn't worth wasting time or effort over and had given up reading the paper altogether, replacing muggle newspapers in her morning paper-coffee routine. Remus too, had taken a very dis-associative stance and scanned through the Prophet every morning without comment or reaction, glossing over the less than flattering takes on Dumbledore and Bella. Sirius however (and typically, sighed Remus) flew into a rage every single morning. Bella and Remus chose to feign apathy to his general mood because they knew he was already at the receiving end of far more shit than either of them as he had to show up at the Ministry every single day for work.

"Hellooo?" sang a cheerful female voice from down the hall and was immediately followed by Walburga's incessant screaming. Remus groaned and got up to stun Walburga's portrait.

Tonks scuttled in looking apologetically at Remus who grimaced at her playfully as he passed her on his way out. "So sorry..." she whispered. "I keep forgetting to shut up when I enter."

Bella smiled happily at her and beckoned for her to sit down. "Pancakes?"

"Hell yes!" Tonks chirped happily, stopping to tug Bella's hair affectionately. Both of them had hit it off since the first Order meeting a week and a half ago and now Tonks took to dropping by every morning for breakfast and dragging a morose Sirius to work every single day and dragging him back every evening where she hung out all night, sometimes sleeping over.

Tonks rolled her eyes at Sirius who still glared at the Prophet. "I've never met someone so determined to ruin their mornings the way he

does." she said quietly to Bella who served her the pancakes and took a seat next to her.

"Tell me about it." muttered Bella. "Things at work still that bad?"

"Yeah. A good fraction of the Aurors aren't going along with Fudge's nonsense. Apart from Kingsley and I, the trainees Ainsley McKnowl, Howard Bleeze and Jonathan Farrows are deeply sceptical about the Ministry's stance. In fact, Kingsley has been wanting to ask Dumbledore to induct them into the order as well. Scrimgeour is sending out mixed signals. I don't think he buys any of the Ministry's propaganda but he is the Head of the Department and it'll be worth more than his life to voice his opinions. He's neutral which is a good thing for us as it keeps the Aurors out of the madness. But the rest of them..." she trailed off, glancing at Sirius.

Bella nodded grimly. "Did Mr Weasley have any luck with Amelia Bones?"

Tonks looked unhappy. "No. Not yet. It's not her that's the problem, but Fudge seems to be anticipating our efforts to reach her. What with Arthur, Sirius and I being constantly tailed, it's getting harder and they're keeping her inaccessible. It'll only be a matter of time before she realizes she's being isolated and shadowed but till then we can't do a thing. We can't risk exposing Kingsley's loyalty to the Order."

Bella swirled her coffee restlessly. "I hate this." she grumbled. "I feel useless sitting here."

Tonks patted her hand sympathetically. "I know. But at-least you can be a part of the Order. Arthur was telling me that Fred, George, Ron and Hermione are furious at being kept out because of their age when you've been made an exception."

Bella smirked. "I know. They've been bombarding me with letters demanding I tell them what's going on. I've been acting smug and telling them to shove it and that they can find out when they are old enough. Being vindictive needs to be glorified some more."

"Bad Bella!" Tonks admonished, her face splitting into a grin identical to hers.

Bella knew she had narrowly escaped a fate similar to the Weasley boys and Hermione. Most of the Order thought she was too young and were keen to protect her rather than involve her. But Sirius, Tonks and Remus had argued on her behalf. It finally got into a huge stand-off between Mrs Weasley and Sirius and the latter settled the matter by pulling the 'Godfather' card. A furious Molly had appealed to Dumbledore but he allowed Sirius's decision to prevail and Bella was officially a member of the Order of the Phoenix.

Bella would never forget that night. Dumbledore had taken her aside to Regulus's room and told her about the prophecy. Now she and Dumbledore were the only ones who really knew why Voldemort was keen to have her killed.

"Nobody knows and it's for the best if it stays that way. The fact that Voldemort does not know the full contents of the prophecy is our greatest weapon and the less the number of people know, the better. Professor Snape knows only a part of it as he was in Lord Voldemort's inner circle, but that's about it."

Bella had nodded mutely, still trying to digest the implication of the prophecy. Neither can live while the other survives... Dumbledore watched her tentatively. He had expected her to crack, to scream, to rage, to go into denial. But Bella had accepted it with almost resignation and her calm air unsettled him.

"Are you al-right?" he asked her cautiously.

"Sure Sure... Perfect." she had replied baldly.

The next day, Dumbledore and her left HQ late at night to go into the Ministry unnoticed. They retrieved the copy of the Prophecy from the Department of Mysteries and destroyed it.

"Voldemort is not foolish enough to try and walk into the Ministry of Magic himself to retrieve it, but he might try manipulating the connection between the two of you and drive you get it and hand it to him. I thought it would be prudent to erase all records of the prophecy." Dumbledore explained on their way back.

The Order members knew of course, that the two of them were up to something. But most of them had contained their curiosity and decided that if Dumbledore wanted to tell them, he would of his own

accord and never brought it up. Almost everybody. Sirius had spent three nights refusing to let her sleep demanding she tell him what had transpired.

"Why won't you tell me?" he demanded, as they lay exhausted after a particularly fierce and wild bout of love-making.

"Mind your own business." she mumbled into his neck, her eyes closed.

"You are my business!"

"Ask Dumbledore."

"I'm asking YOU!"

"Good night."

"Bella! I'm not having sex with you any more till you tell me!"

"Suit yourself."

"You think that's an empty threat, don't you?"

"Yep."

"One day... I really will carry that out."

"Uh huh..." Bella grinned mischievously. She shrugged his arms away and lowered her head, flicking her tongue against his Adam's apple. She was rewarded with a soft hiss. Her hands brushed against his pelvic bone, slowly moving to his inner thigh and made its way back up to...

"You will be the death of me Bella." Sirius whispered harshly, as he pulled her up into a rough kiss and the two of them lost themselves in the midst of whispered sweet nothings, heated, wild love and pleasure beyond description for the third time that night.

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"You're joking!" Bella said flatly, staring at Dumbledore. Behind him, Severus Snape scowled heavily at the two of them. Remus stared at

Snape and after a long moment managed an uncertain smile. "Welcome to Grimmauld Place Severus. Sirius and Bella thankfully managed to de-infest a few other rooms apart from the ones the three of us are using. I'm sure there will be one that you will be comfortable with."

"Thank you." Snape replied stiffly, his eyes glued to the back of Dumbledore's head.

"Dumbledore this is madness! Sirius and him can't even stay in the same room together without lapsing into hexing one another within seconds! And not to mention your beloved Potions master loathes the air I breathe. You really expect to keep him safe by having him live here? He'll be better off with Voldemort." Bella fumed.

Dumbledore looked at her tiredly. "Lord Voldemort wants to kill Severus as much as he wants to kill you. He does not take kindly to being betrayed and he cannot return to his residence at Spinner's End for the summer. I expected better from you Bella." He looked at her with disappointment.

Bella flinched at the expression. She hurried to say, "I have nothing against him staying here! If it'll keep him safe, so be it! But he's not exactly the president of my fan club and Sirius..." she trailed off.

"I will ensure Sirius behaves himself." Remus volunteered quietly.

"And I don't hate you."

If Bella hadn't physically seen Snape's lips move, she would've never believed he actually said it. She stared at him in astonishment, while he continued to stare stoically at Dumbledore, refusing to meet her eyes.

"Well..." she said finally. "I suppose that's a start. Welcome aboard... Professor."

Snape looked at her piercingly, then seemed to almost smile.

Dumbledore looked back and forth between them, amused by the sudden, almost resigned geniality. "Well... that went better than I could've ever hoped for." The twinkle was back in his eyes.

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Bella hesitated, then knocked on the door. "Come in."

She cautiously turned the knob and entered the room. Severus Snape glanced up at her.

"There will be a meeting tonight once the others get back from work. Professor McGonagall, Hestia, Sturgis, Emmeline and Mundugus will be coming in too. Remus wanted me to pass on the message."

Snape nodded stiffly. "Thank You."

Bella replied unsurely. "Sure. And ... If you feel up to it, you can join Tonks, Remus, Sirius and I for dinner. We'll get Sirius to shut up. If you promise to do the same, of course. If you're understandably uncomfortable with that, I can get you your dinner to your room."

Snape looked at her for a moment. "I'll get my dinner here. I doubt Black will concede to affability over the dining table and deal with having me as a long term house guest all in one day."

Bella's lips twitched. "As you wish. And personally, I think you're right."

Snape looked at her for a second before saying, " And you, Potter? You aren't throwing a fit at having me here. Why's that? You're as much a fan of me as I am of you."

Bella looked at him before mirroring his earlier words softly. "I don't hate you."

Snape raised his eyebrows and Bella felt compelled to elaborate. "You're a thorn in my side, a weekly nightmare I can't run away from and I have fantasized your death more number of times than I care to count. But the truth is, the only reason I hate you is because, as childish as this sounds – you started it. You've been giving me the evil eye from the very first night I stepped into Hogwarts and hell at every opportunity. I hate you because you hate me. And ..." she hesitated. Snape continued to look at her expectantly.

"Remus told me how my Dad and Sirius gave you hell when you were in school." she finally said.

Snape's eyes flashed dangerously. "Indeed?"

Bella nodded. "And I guess it makes sense why you hate me now. If... If I ever met my cousin's children in future, I don't think I'll find it easy to be amicable to them."

Snape stared at her in undisguised surprise for a moment before his usual sour mask slipped back. "You're not entirely like James Potter." he finally said.

Bella shrugged. "I'm not sure if that's a compliment or insult so I won't respond to that."

Snape looked at her then a sneer appeared. "So... Should I place Silencing Charms around my bed or have you and Black mastered the art of fornicating silently?"

Bella pursed her lips, her stance hardening, all trace of friendliness disappearing. "I suggest you keep your ... deductions to yourself."

"A clandestine affair. How... entertaining!"

"Grow up."

"I have. Your Godfather on the other hand... Sleeping with fifteen year old girls is a habit I thought he would get over as soon as he left school. Apparently, some things never change."

Bella's eyes flashed. "I'm warning you... One word about this..."

Snape looked at her coolly. "You stupid, delusional child. Do you really think nobody knows what you and Black are doing? Phineas Nigellus might not have access to your rooms due to the lack of portraits in Orion or Regulus Black's rooms, but he figured out enough to tell Dumbledore. It's only a matter of time before everyone else finds out Potter. And it's with all good intentions I warn you to be prepared to answer them because nobody, including your precious werewolf guardian will stand by either of you in this matter. And even if Dumbledore seems to understand, this is one issue where his word or support will mean naught to all your assumed guardians, who by the way, seem to plentiful in number these days."

Bella turned on her heel. "I will ensure your dinner is sent upstairs. I will see you at the meeting."

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Emmeline and Minerva looked at Bella and Remus anxiously. Severus leaned against the kitchen with a grim expression.

"Kicked out of the Wizengamot?" repeated Remus weakly, clutching the table-top for support.

"But..." Bella stared at the women aghast. "It's Dumbledore! The entire Ministry is siding with Fudge over Dumbledore? I mean, I thought the worst it would get to was media propaganda but this is going too far!"

"This is disaster. We can't fight the Ministry and the Dark Lord all at once!" groaned Minerva rubbing her eyes.

"They're coming down really hard on both of you." whispered Emmeline anxiously. "Bella, you'll be next. They couldn't have forgotten about you in their campaign against Dumbledore. We need to be prepared for the worst."

Bella glared angrily. "There's very little they can do to me! The worst is kick me out of school, which in the larger scheme of things with Voldemort's return, is not really the worst case scenario."

"I never thought I'd say this, but I agree with Potter." ventured Snape. "She's underage and she's gone underground the last few weeks. Apart from chastise her for being a disobedient brat in school, there's not much else they can do. I'd be more worried about Black, who's her legal guardian, or the Weasleys, whom they know she's very close to."

The fireplace burst into green flames and revolving figures stumbled one by one into the Black residence.

Sirius, Tonks and Kingsley quietly slid up to her. Sirius silently held out a sealed envelope to Bella. The letter was addressed to her.

"Amelia Bones' secretary gave this to me and I was told to ensure it reaches you. The owls have been unsuccessful in tracing you because we haven't deactivated any Ministry owl from being repelled by the unplotable charm on this house." Sirius said quietly.

Everybody else sat up straighter, looking at the envelope with sudden dread. Bella slit it open and unfolded the parchment.

Dear Ms Potter,

This is to inform you that you are marked as a prime suspect in the case of Cedric Diggory's death. Your status as ' underage' witch does not allow for standard procedures of arrest. However, you will be required to attend an investigative trial in the presence of the Wizengamot on the 15th of August at 10:00 a.m in Courtroom Ten.

You are not entitled to a defence authority or allowed to bring any witnesses.

If you fail to appear, an arrest warrant will be issued and you will be sentenced to Azkaban without any promise of a trial henceforth.

Regards,

Reginald Markoqix,

Department of Law Enforcement,

Ministry of Magic

Bella looked up to meet everyone's horrified expression. "Well," she said slowly. "This explains their sudden dire need to remove Dumbledore from the jury. And isn't tomorrow the 15th?"

"You're not going." Sirius declared in a rather matter-of-fact tone, breaking the silence.

"That amounts to absconding." pointed out Bella.

"So be it! You are not setting one foot in that fucking place!"

"I'm not hiding from them! I didn't kill Cedric and I'm not going to act like a petty murderer fearing the law."

"Potter, Black. If you both shut up the rest of us can do more than bicker and think this through." Severus said tersely.

Sirius turned to him, looking absolutely furious, his wand raised. Tonks caught his arm and glared at him. Remus moved to stand behind Bella, his face ashen, his hands reaching for her shoulders like he wouldn't be able to stand without support.

Minerva turned, tight lipped, to Severus. "Where is Albus? He should've been here already."

Severus looked like he needed a good night's rest when he said "I don't know. He was intending to go to Eastern Europe to amass support. The Bulgarians are already unnerved by Karakoff's disappearance. They need to be calmed before any more conspiracy theories against Dumbledore start floating."

"So he may not come?" asked Minerva weakly. "We need to get in touch with him!"

"Already here, Minerva." Dumbledore's deep voice sounded from the hallway. He strode in, looking grim and rather like when he discovered that Moody was actually Crouch. "I cancelled my visit to Bulgaria the minute I was notified of the termination of my position as permanent jury council member."

He turned to Bella. "I'm sorry about everything. I never thought I'd see the day when I would have to admit something like this, but I have no power, other than the persuasive kind, over the Ministry. Needless to say, with Fudge's attitude, that is hardly something I can proudly talk about."

Bella shrugged warily. "It's alright Professor. You've been taking the rap all this while. I'm just surprised they've taken this much time to start up on me. We should've seen it coming when Skeeter reported Fudge saying I should be questioned over Cedric's death."

Dumbledore surveyed her. "I supposed I shouldn't be shocked you're taking this better than I expected. You never cease to amaze me, Bella."

"Wait a minute!" cut across Tonks furiously. "What do you mean we can't do anything about this? Dumbledore you can't be serious! There's nothing we... YOU... can do?"

Dumbledore looked truly his age at that moment, which startled Bella. Do wizards get strokes?

"No, I'm afraid not Nymphadora." He turned to Bella. "We have two options. We can take this head on and face the trial and fight them; or you can choose to lie low and hide."

"I'm not hiding." replied Bella immediately.

Sirius and Remus started shouting something at the same time, but it was Severus' cold voice that cut across their tirade. "This is not the time to pander to your reckless hero complex Potter!"

"My decision has nothing to do with heroism." said Bella. "If I hide, my status in the wizarding world as a criminal will be cemented. Everybody associated with me – the Weasleys, Sirius, Remus and even Dumbledore will be dragged in and possibly arrested. It is in the interest of the Order and our fight against Voldemort that I should go. We can't afford to make more enemies, especially out of delusional Ministry officials, when we have serious problems like the Death Eaters."

Arthur, who had come in at some point during the exchange, spoke up quietly. "I agree. It's only an investigative trial. They will question and harass her a bit, but she's under-age. Madam Marchbanks and a few others are still loyal to Dumbledore. They will ensure that she's treated fairly."

"And Amelia Bones will never allow for the mis-treatment of a juvenile." agreed Kingsley. "Is there any way we can reach her tonight?"

Arthur shook his head. "They've blocked the entire Floo network surrounding her office and home. The owls are unable to penetrate the charm. Portkeys don't activate within a fifty feet radius around her."

Emmeline snorted. "If she ever finds out, she'll have their heads."

"Hopefully that'll happen soon." Dumbledore said. "I'm going to attempt using Fawkes to trace her, but without a prior indication or calling from Madam Bones, it will be hard."

"Whether or not she is on our side, she will ensure Bella is given a fair chance to defend herself." spoke up Remus, not sounding as confident as he would've liked.

"So it's settled." said Bella tiredly. "But why am I not allowed any witnesses or a defendant? Isn't that illegal?"

"They must've pulled up some of the clauses on restricted trials from Barty Crouch's laws-from-hell." Sirius said tiredly, his grey-blue eyes haunted, as if he could hear the cells of Azkaban shut behind him.

"How can they just do that? Why were those laws never amended?" demanded Tonks.

"When the Dark Lord fell, there was so much to reconstruct and any Death Eater caught, was given a trial anyway, to see if names could be obtained. In the fiasco that followed, the calls for the amendments look a back-seat."

Sirius muttered something indecipherable that seemed to vaguely suggest his intention to resurrect Crouch only to kill him more painfully.

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"Just... tell them what happened. And it'll be over. Since you are telling the truth, you don't have anything to be afraid if they try using Veritaserum." Arthur told her consolingly. Sirius stood on her other

side, largely silent. Bella gave him a side-long glance, wondering if it was the trial that was stressing him out, or the prospect of having to face Remus on returning to Grimmauld Place.

It had been an awful night in more ways than one. Bella had to drag a drunk Sirius up to bed and invariably both of them ended up in bed together, pulling each other's clothes off. In his state of intoxication, he had forgotten to use the Muffliato spell, as a result of which the sound of their activities reached Remus' ears. Something like a leaked petrol explosion in a car accident erupted from the werewolf's throat as he threw their bedroom door open to catch them bang in the middle of a very heated moment. Bella had to keep herself between Sirius and Remus for the rest of the night as the latter screamed himself hoarse, while the former cringed and hid behind her. It didn't help that Snape had decided to forgo his sleep to hang around with a grimly satisfied smile as Remus attempted to strangle Sirius.

"Moony stop it!" yelled Bella, finally having had enough. "I love him!"

"Love him? Love him?" Remus looked even more apoplectic than he did a minute ago. "This... fucking dick... doesn't have a clue what love is!"

"Rem, please..." pleaded Sirius. "It's not like that... Not with Bella..."

"Bella!" roared Remus. "Your own god-daughter! You really have no limits, do you? James' daughter! Your best friend's daughter! How could you!"

"Shout at me as well, if you must!" yelled Bella, turning on the spot, preventing Remus from reaching around her to grab Sirius' collar. "It takes two people to have sex!"

Remus stared at her. "Sex?" he asked weakly. Uh oh... Oh crap... He honestly didn't realize it had gotten that far?

"You... You fucking..." spluttered Remus, staring at Sirius utterly horrified.

"Pimp? Man-whore?" supplied Severus.

"Don't you have someplace else to be?" snarled Bella.

"Not really. Nothing that can't wait till Black's done with his explanation for his abominable behaviour."

Remus looked at Severus hard. "You ..."

"Knew? For months."

"This has been going on for months?"

"Moony... This is not a one off thing, alright? We love each other..." began Bella, sounding placating.

Remus just shook his head, staring at the ground. "Under my nose..." he whispered. He looked up at Bella with an agonized expression. "Bella... How could I let this happen... Oh hell... James, I'm so sorry..."

Bella ground her teeth. For the love of Merlin...! What's up with all the drama? Like my dead father is going to give a damn as to whom I'm doing!

"Moony?" Sirius cut in quietly. "I love her with all my heart. I've already asked and she's said yes. We're going to get married when she's of age."

Remus blinked.

Snape choked and spat out his tea.

A long silence followed. Bella and Sirius watched them nervously.

Remus finally spoke. "Sirius Black? Married?"

Bella could feel Sirius practically sag in relief behind her. "Yeah... Unbelievable, I know, but Rem I love this girl with all that I have... I need you to understand."

Remus looked at him coldly. "You are fucked in the head. Seriously fucked. I just wish James was here. You could never do any wrong in his eyes. I'm curious... does sleeping with his fifteen year old daughter still come under his 'Padfoot can do no wrong ceiling' or

have you actually done something that can make you truly unredeemable, even for him?"

Sirius had spent rest of the night lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling, knowing full well James would've skinned him alive were he here; If Lily didn't beat him to it already. Bella knew that there would be no point in consoling him and Remus was too angry to be dealt with. She had spent the night in the kitchen baking chocolate cake to calm her nerves that were already taut because of the impending trial. Oddly enough, Severus stayed downstairs with her. They didn't exchange a single word, but his presence helped her keep the bubbling hysteria at bay. Bella strongly suspected that he seemed to understand that she needed to be around someone and had stayed the entire night without a single word of complaint or anything else, reading a book by the fire.

Now, standing outside the courtroom, only partially comforted by Arthur's reassurance, she tentatively brushed her hand against Sirius's.

He responded by slipping his large hands around her small ones and squeezing tight. His eyes were soft and determined. Bella knew he had come to some sort of decision and suddenly she wondered if she wanted to know. I cannot take any more of this! Attending a trial as a murder suspect, Voldemort returning, Godfather/boyfriend freaking out and possibly considering calling it off, supremely pissed off werewolf surrogate father... I'm going to slip into coma from all the tension.

Sirius smiled, as if he could read her mind. He bent down and pulled her into a loving kiss- right on the lips, in front of a thoroughly stunned Arthur Weasley.

Bella almost laughed out loud in relief. She returned his kiss with enthusiasm. Well... one down, a hundred more problems to go. But who the fuck cares?

Arthur came to his senses and he cleared his throat. If he had any strongly worded opinions about what he just witnessed, he seemed to have come to a conclusion that now was not the moment to voice them. He glanced at his watch. "It's time, Bella. Good luck." He smiled gently at her. "We'll be waiting. We're taking you back to the

Burrow for the day. Fred and George can't wait to speak to a real convict-to-be." He winked at her and Bella grinned back, feeling uplifted at the thought of what awaited her once she was done with the ridiculous so-called trial.

Bella nodded and turned to go, then hesitated. She looked at Sirius for a moment before reaching into her pockets and pulling out her wand. She held it out to him.

"Keep this. In case... They expel me or something... they'll snap it..."

Sirius glared at her. "You are not going in unarmed! If they snap it, we'll buy a new one."

Bella shook her head. "No. This wand... Just keep it alright." Olivander's eerily whispered secret about her wand being Voldemort's wand'd brother suddenly seemed to strike as ominous. She couldn't shake the feeling that her wand would be able to protect her better than any other one.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed the heavy door open and walked inside before Sirius forced her to take her wand back. Her footsteps seemed unnaturally loud and echoed around the cavernous room. She cautiously approached the straight-backed steel chair at the centre of the room, hoping her face didn't betray her sudden misgivings as she took in the amphitheatre of very cold, leering faces that promised hell. She carefully took a seat and looked at Fudge, who was right up above her, expectantly.

He returned her gaze with a nasty smile and clapped his hands twice.

Bella's throat went dry as solid, black, iron links materialized from the arm of her chair and crept across her body, clinking ominously, binding her tightly to her chair.

!!!!!!!

Dumbledore glanced at the clock. The trial should've started a while ago. Please Bella, keep your head and don't lose your temper. Don't give them more ammunition against you.

He was distracted by a sudden flash of light and much to his alarm, Fawkes appeared in his study, accompanied by...

"Amelia?"Dumbledore stared at the tall woman astounded.

Madam Bones straightened up and looked at the old man with affection.

"Albus... Thank God! I've been trying to speak to you for days! What in the world is going on?"

Dumbledore continued to stare at her. "What," he finally asked. "are you doing here? Did you cancel the trial?"

Amelia stared at him. "What trial? I've been forced to go on leave by Fudge! I haven't as much as even stepped out of the house the last two weeks! They have me trapped inside Dumbledore. They knew you were trying to reach me. If it weren't for Fawkes, I'd still be pacing in front of the hearth. Albus what..? Albus?"

Albus Dumbledore was the very picture of fury, his blue eyes blazing, the lines on his face deepening with every millisecond.

"Fawkes! The Ministry of Magic, London. We must go now!"

!!!!!!!!!!

Sirius kept his gaze averted from the locked courtroom door while Arthur did the opposite and looked at it with an intensity that could've bored holes in it.

"It's been a while now." whispered Arthur. "What are they still doing?"

Both of them were distracted by the sound of hurried footsteps. Rufus Scrimgeour was practically flying down the corridor, his face set in a grim mask.

"Weasley, get out now! You better be found in your office in the next ten minutes."

Arthur narrowed his eyes dangerously at him. "Don't you dare talk to me like that Scrimgeour."

Scrimgeour glowered at him. "You fool! You have no idea what grave danger you will be in if you're found here waiting for Potter. Now! Shacklebolt will explain. Leave now Weasley! Please!"

Arthur looked startled. He opened his mouth to argue but changed his mind at the expression on Scrimgeour's face. "Very well." He turned and strode out towards the elevator, a sinking feeling in his stomach.

Scrimgeour turned his rough, feline face towards Sirius. In a low, urgent voice, "Black, you need to listen to what I have to say carefully. They're tightening the net around all of you. We're damned lucky Fudge thinks I'm on his side. I managed to find out just in time. Here." He thrust an old piece of parchment into Sirius's hand. "It's a portkey. It will activate in 30 seconds."

Sirius looked at him sharply. "Rufus... What's happening?"

"Even as we speak, the Wizengamot is issuing an arrest warrant for you, for abetting in Cedric Diggory's death. They're going to claim you're in cahoots with Potter and they're even planning to revoke the pardon and declaration of innocence they issued to you last year."

"What?"

"Don't come back into the Ministry premises ever. Go underground. I will keep issuing false leads on your whereabouts to buy you some time. Get out of here."

Sirius' eyes went wide. "Bella..." he whispered, whipping his head towards the door. "Rufus... What...?"

The parchment in his hand glowed. The last thing Sirius saw before he felt a jerk behind his navel was regret deeply etched on Scrimgeour's face.

"I'm sorry I couldn't reach Potter before they did."

!!!!!!!!!!

"The defendant Bella Artemis Potter stands accused of conspiring against the Government, indulging in malpractice in the Triwizard

tournament and the murder of Cedric Diggory." Percy Weasley's cool voice rang in Bella's ears. Her blood pounded so hard she was sure everybody in the courtroom could hear it. "If the defendant has anything to say in her defence, she is requested to speak up and make use of the allotted time of 300 seconds starting now, before the jury converges to conclude and pass their verdict."

Bella knew right then, she was dead meat. She glanced around at the stern faces, desperately seeking expressions that showed more curiosity than hostility. Where is this famed Amelia Bones? Madam Marchbanks? Bella had an awful instinct that told her that jury had been trimmed and customized to suit Cornelius Fudge. It suddenly occurred to her that she would've already wasted a good 30 of her precious 300 seconds. For the first time since her toddler days with the Dursleys, Bella was terrified and tongue tied.

"I... No... Murder Cedric? He was my friend!" spluttered Bella, her stomach twisting as she remembered the honourable Hufflepuff who she had thought of as her friend. And she wanted to cry. Standing in the courtroom, surrounded by people who wanted to do blame her for his death, Cedric's death truly hit her for the first time. I won't ever see him again... Ever... He's gone... It should have been me...

Grief fuelled her vocal chords and this time, her voice was clear and rang across the room. "Cedric Diggory was my friend and idol. I would never hurt a hair on his head. I supported him and backed him as potential Triwizard champion through and through. I did not enter the tournament, nor did anybody else do so at my behest."

She took a deep breath and fiercely met Fudge's condescending gaze. "Lord Voldemort murdered Cedric Diggory. He had Barty Crouch junior enter me for the tournament to ultimately trap me and use my blood for his resurrection. Cedric was innocent and was blasted out of the way just because he was there."

Angry whispers and muttering broke out. A woman who resembled a toad, with a ridiculous pink bow on her hair, leaned forward and looked at Bella with almost indulgent amusement. "You certainly do seem to think much of yourself, don't you Miss Potter? An elaborate plan based on the wizarding world to ensnare a young, fourteen year old witch to resurrect a dead wizard... You should look into a career as a writer for children's books. With your imagination..."

Nasty, cold laughter broke out from various jury members while others only looked more angry.

Bella felt her temper rise and she snapped. "My imagination doesn't compare to yours or Minister Fudge's. I must say I'm impressed with the tall tales you've been fabricating for the Prophet and feeding the public. I'd bow in respect – one story teller to another, if I weren't so tied up!" She sneered at them.

There was no trace of laughter – bitter, mocking or otherwise. Every single face was riveted to hers, dislike and disgust splayed across all their features. The toad lady's face hardened and she said in a soft, dangerous voice "You'd do well to remember that you are facing the most influential members of one of the world's most powerful wizarding governments. I'd tread lightly and with more respect if I were you, silly girl."

Bella smiled coldly. "You haven't earned that respect and from what I perceive, you will never be worthy of it. You delusional fools... Are you so determined to turn a blind eye to what is happening just because it's easier?"

Fudge jumped up from his chair, knocking it backwards. "You insolent brat!" he roared. "How dare you question our motives? We've struggled for fourteen years to rebuild a maimed world and you think we would allow an attention - seeking, silly little self serving cretin like you destroy it with your rumours and lies?"

The cautioning voice in her head that was telling her to calm down and get a grip of her anger was lost in the tide of rage that swept over her. She shouted right back at him. "Attention seeking? You lumbering moron! The damned wizarding world raised me on a pedestal for something I don't even remember! You seemed eager on glorifying the damned Girl-Who-Lived the first time around! Not so keen to have me do it twice are you? Trick getting old for you? Should I switch to the next act? You're going to destroy everything beyond comprehension by feigning ignorance Fudge! "

Fudge towered over her. "You killed Cedric Diggory."

"I did not."

"You were the last person who saw him before his death."

"Lord Voldemort killed him."

"The Dark Lord is dead. It was you. You wanted to be the Triwizard Champion didn't you Potter? You were willing to do anything for that..."

"Are you out of your fucking mind? I would never..."

"You used the killing curse on him!"

"I don't know how to use the killing curse! It takes magic beyond my level!"

"You can produce a corporeal Patronus, can you not Potter?"

"I...A what Patronus?"

"A full fledged Patronus! I saw it with my own eyes last year! You drove the Dementors from Black!"

"Well yeah... I can produce a corporeal Patronus! What is your point?"

She stilled at the victorious expressions on their faces. Fudge smiled triumphantly at her. "A girl who can produce a corporeal Patronus can well find it in her capacity to produce an Unforgivable!"

"That is such bullshit... You're manipulating everything for your convenience Fudge!"

"Manipulating? Oh oh! You would know something about that wouldn't you Potter? A half-giant friend, a werewolf guardian, a convicted Death Eater for a god-father... you seem to be a little power hungry Potter..."

"Don't you dare ... you sick, prejudiced fool! All these people have goodness and decency that your precious pureblood pals like Malfoy couldn't even dream of having a fraction of in his sick, twisted mind!"

"Worthy sentiments from a Parseltongue."

"Unworthy thoughts from a Prime Minister. Seriously... They voted you in? How many people did you have to pay and coerce to vote for you Fudge? It would break my heart if it turns out the entire wizarding population really is stupid enough to pick you voluntarily."

Bella knew that had been the last straw. Fudge's face was twisted with fury, making him look completely out of control and quite mad.

"Jury members... Those in favour of finding the defendant guilty?"

Bella didn't have to count the show of hands to know that majority of them thought so. She closed her eyes. They can't arrest me. Juvenile... They just can't... She tried to quell the panic.

Fudge's voice barely suppressed his glee.

"And those in favour, given the seriousness of the situation and ample evidence that the defendant is no ordinary, harmless or misguided youngster as against a well informed, coldly calculative terrorist, for treating this case as equivalent to that of the apprehending of an adult?"

Wait a minute... What? WHAT?

The show of hands indicated a clear majority again. Bella felt them even before she heard Fudge's next sentence. The cold swept down her lungs and the screaming in her head slowly tuned it, like an antenna being adjusted to receive the radio waves.

"Those in favour of sentencing the defendant to life imprisonment in Azkaban, raise your hands."

Bella's vision slid in and out of focus, her mother's begging and Voldemort's cruel laugh intermingling – a cacophony that made her head scream in agony. Her scar throbbed and the vicious memories bottled up burst open. And Bella realized that the screaming wasn't just her mother anymore, but her own horror had materialized through her larynx and burst forth from her lips.

"The defendant has been decreed guilty. Take her away."

Bella struggled and twisted, but the minute dead, cold, scabby digits closed over her forearms, she lost herself to the darkness – physical and emotional.

The void sucked her in and from every corner she saw all that she tucked away in the safety of her mind. The name Bella stopped ringing bells anymore and by the time she was dragged off the boat, the cold sea spray drenching her limp form, Bella had managed to lose sense of space, time, self and anything that could be used to comprehend the world.

Ice.

Sorrow.

Hatred.

Despair.

Loneliness.

Rage.

It circled her like vultures hovering over a corpse and she was naught. Bitterness shackled by her reason and conscience broke free, releasing terrible demons and Bella tasted and drowned in the darkness that would haunt her for the rest of her living days.

!!!!!!!

Quidel looked oddly transparent, like he was fading into the air around him. The Order members watched anxiously.

"Aren't you sad? You're dying..." asked Alice timidly.

He smiled at her. "It's a relief to go. My life has not been a gift. It has been the embodiment of a curse – literally and figuratively."

"Quidel," Remus asked, suddenly looking thoughtful. "I've been wondering... What happens to the muggles when the worlds collide? This is the end of the Statute of Secrecy isn't it?"

"Not really." replied Quidel. "Muggles will only truly remember one life. Their memories from their alternate universe will be suppressed by their own defence against all that they cannot understand. It's a rather strange kink in their system – a section of the brain hides that which they see, which they cannot make sense of. Most muggles will only have shadowed images or dreamlike memories of their alternate lives."

"And the dead coming alive?"

"Well.. when the world merge, they really collide rather harshly. It's like stretching a rubber band and suddenly letting it go. When the worlds collide, the physical realities of the stronger reality – in its metaphysical sense as well as energy levels, will hold while the other dissipates. In this case, your reality is the stronger one. Only magical folk can hold their forms and transcend if an alternate ego of theirs does not exist while two of the same bodies merge as one. If anything, it is muggleborn children who are yet to be told of the existence of the magical world, who will have a really terrible time. Some muggles will realize of course, that something has gone terribly wrong. But the perceptive ones usually never lead a normal life anyway... They're the ones who spend their lives chasing all that they struggle and mostly fail to see..."

James looked around blearily. "I don't think I really got it but I've understood that the crux of the matter is that we're fucked beyond comprehension. Dead. Whamed. Run over by rampaging dragons. How are we ever going to sort this out?"

"I have no idea." admitted Dumbledore, speaking up for the first time that evening.

"Let's not go there mate..." Sirius said tiredly. "Let it happen and we'll take it as it comes."

Lily straightened up as she noticed something completely bizarre. Quidel's form had gotten even more lighter, airy... And his outline shimmered.

"Quidel?" she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. This is it!

He smiled at all of them.

"My time here is up. Fortune fare you well my friends... May all the forces be with you."

With a last smile, he turned away and closed his eyes. His entire being sparkled and fizzled with silver spangles before he suddenly, and quite simply, exploded into a million atoms of stardust. They stood stunned, staring at the vacant space that was Quidel, wondering what on earth just happened when Sirius let out a low moan. He slowly slid to his knees, his eyes wide, the pain evident in them.

James and Lily started. Around them, various order members had fallen to their knees, holding their head as though preventing it from splitting wide open.

A single minute of silence encased them.

And the screaming began. They writhed and screamed in horror, fighting the pain that threatened to tear them apart. Memories they never had cascaded into their conscience.

They were them;

they were somebody else;

they were whole;

they were fragmented...

And those who were fortunate enough to have survived in only either existence, stood in terror-struck rigidity as apocalypse broke out all around them.

A/N:

Huh... Another one of these. I seem to be writing these more often than I thought I would.

A few pointers:

Thanks you Cristalelle for many of your valuable questions, some of which deal with the technicalities I have tried (and to be honest, not exactly succeeded) to give sufficient answers in the chapter above.

Especially the one about the effect of the curse on Muggles. I know that was a sketchy explanation, but I gave the matter zero thought when I started the story and quite frankly, was stumped when you asked me. So I've explained it using barely viable logic. LOL. My sincerest apologies.

Also, you guys might've noticed I've decided Bella's middle name should be Artemis. Seems a bit arbitrary but I know somebody will eventually ask and I figured I might as well explain. Artemis (Diana is her Roman avatar) is the greek goddess of hunt. She's Apollo's sister (He's the sun) and she and Orion (a mortal and a hunter) end up having an affair, which Apollo disapproves of because he thinks it's inappropriate for a goddess to consort with a mortal. There are many versions of this myth which claim that Apollo tricks Artemis into killing Orion accidentally.

Sirius Black's middle name is Orion (after his father). And I thought it was hell apt to symbolize the conflict in Bella and Sirius's relationship - both, the seeming inappropriateness and the disapproval it evokes, as well as the way they drag each other into the very pits of Hades while battling their own inner hell.

Dramatic much? I know... I'm overworked and my brain's frying. Please put up with me... It'll pass. I think :O

And as always, If I've decided to stick in a note, I'll use the opportunity to thank my reviewers and all those of you who've added me to your fav lists and alerts. I am not exaggerating even the smallest iota when I say you give me all the motivation I need to write. Thanks a tonne and I hope the story continues to meet your expectations.

I'd also like to throw in a special thank you to some of my reviewers who have taken the time to review more than just once, often giving me feedback for every single chapter. I love that you take the time and I do my best to incorporate all your inputs. Thank You Desiqtie, First Lady Lestat, annixxx, Paladin-kriiss, harlequin320 and dhh!

Cheers! :)

-Broken Ink Bottles

A/N:

Right then, I absolutely hated 'Phasing' because it was so small... and had plenty of errors. So I've rewritten it and progressed a bit more. I will update tomorrow as promised but I just couldn't leave the chapter as it was and decided my sleep could wait. I think I'm becoming addicted to FF beyond a level that's acceptable. Should I be worried that I'm on my way to becoming a delinquent madwoman incapable of functioning without fanfiction? :s Ok don't answer that :P

A major oversight was Fabian and Gideon being surprised by Ginny's existence in Phasing I. They were present when Quidel recounted Bella's life and obviously he would've mentioned that Ginny was the one who Voldemort possessed. Also, I hated that bit about Ginerva being Molly's old friend. It sounded like uninspired B***S*** even when I was typing it and frankly, it was. So slight modifications there. And of course, an extension to ensure that the chapter is of a more respectable length! :)

Thank you, my four faithful reviewers! - Paladin-kriiss, Cristabelle, dhh and harlequin320 :)

Oh and dhh? - 'Whoa!' on the Weasley hatred! :O

James gazed at his friends' faces as he tried to digest the changes that were already perceivable to his anxious mind. Sirius and Remus both lay in the two large beds in the mostly redundant guest room at Godric's Hollow, still unconscious since the previous night. James shuddered at the memory. All the screaming, the madness... After long moments of hysteria, all those who had been having their memories meshed just collapsed, Dumbledore included. James fidgeted nervously. Lily was downstairs taking care of Dumbledore and although she assured him he seemed to be alright, James wished the old wizard would open his eyes. Same goes for Padfoot and Moony...

On cue, Remus stirred slowly. James straightened up, reaching for his wand. He muttered under his breath and his silvery patronus shot out, in search of Lily. James had no clue why, but he just didn't want to do this alone.

Remus moaned softly, his face scrunching in obvious pain. Lily silently came into the room and stood behind James, her hands

clutching his shoulders, the strength of her grip betraying her anxiety that was hidden by a neutral expression that was developed over years of trained emergency medicare and spending day after day coming upon destroyed homes and bodies.

Remus opened his eyes and James flinched at what he saw there momentarily. Remus had always been mature and wise, but he never looked this old. He slowly blinked and turned his head and his eyes locked with Lily's. For a long moment he just stared at her before slowly lowering his gaze to meet James.

A minute passed, Five minutes, Ten... James lost track as he forced himself to meet his friend's gaze, trying not to worry about how blank he looked. James knew Remus well... It was the expression he usually had when he had too much on his mind and was trying to sort out everything to make sense of it.

Lily's grip on her husband tightened. "James..." she whispered uncertainly. James held up his hand, cautioning her to remain silent.

Her voice seemed to have acted as a shot in the arm for Remus who started shuddering. His breathing came out heavy and wracked. James jumped and gripped his arm. "Moony..." he whispered frantically. "Shh... It's okay... It's all going to be alright... Breathe... We're right here..."

James heart clenched as Remus curled up into a foetal position, his eyes never leaving James'. He rocked back and forth whispering, "Dead... No... Not dead.. James and Lily... No.. No.. Dead... Killed... No... Bella?... Wormy... Oh Wormy!... No No..." His eyes were wide and fearful and he flinched away from James' arm.

James wanted to flee and never return. Watching calm, composed Remus fall apart and whimper like a child made him feel nauseated. He took a step back, terrified. At the same moment Lily stepped forward. She reached for Remus, settling into the bed next to him, pulling him into her arms. Remus stared at her wide eyed, reaching for a lock of her hair with trembling arms. "Of course you're alive..." he whispered. "No.. You're dead... No Bella's... Bella? Lily...?"

At long last his eyes lit up in understanding, as both his memories fell into place, as his brain processed Quidel's story and struggled with memories that were from another world. And the dam burst. He

cried. Remus Lupin cried as both his life's collided and silently compartmentalized into various parts of his brain. His losses, his lives and everything he suffered and hadn't in another life met and tango'd and all he could do was weep. Lily held him and silently rocked him like a child.

James took another step back turning his head to stare at Sirius' still form. He couldn't bear it anymore. Another step back before he collided with something. He jumped and turned to come face to face with Albus Dumbledore.

"Steady James..." murmured Albus, his eyes on Remus. He too, looked worn but there was no denying the happy twinkle in his eye.

"Are you... Alright?" asked James uncertainly, looking for signs that would alert him of any notion Dumbledore had of breaking down like Remus.

"Never been better." replied the old man. He looked kindly at James. "Don't worry about him James. It's overwhelming. I just got up myself and it's not easy..." He suddenly frowned.

And James almost choked at what he saw on the old man's face. The geniality vanished and a terrible expression took its place.

"Where are the rest of the order?" he demanded.

"Fabian took Alice, Frank and Sturgis back to his place. They were unconscious. Gideon is with Emmeline, Tonks and Kingsley at Emmeline's house... All of you were falling apart and it was mayhem. We... we thought it best if you lot were split up and we handled you in smaller groups."

Dumbeldore nodded, still looking angry. "Wise of you. I need you to track Amelia Bones. She was with me in the other world. Actually... No. Fawkes will be with her and keep her safe. Call Scrimgeour. He is the Minister of Magic, no?"

"Er... yes." James found it unnerving that Dumbledore needed to confirm who the Prime Minister was. "We need to explain what's happening to him. Good Merlin... Everyone must be so fucked in the head, with no clue as to what's happening to them..."

Dumbledore stared at him for a minute before comprehending. "Oh Yes. That must also be done."

Also? What is more important than that?

"Dumbledore..." rasped out Remus from behind. "Bella... She's at the trial... Must get her out..."

James stilled at the mention of his daughter. "Trial?" he asked slowly.

Dumbledore stared at Remus. "It was set up. Amelia was locked in. She didn't even know."

Remus stared at him for a second before letting out a cry of horror. "Dumbledore what..?"

"They took her even before I reached the Ministry." whispered Dumbledore.

"Took her where?"

All four of them started and swivelled to face Sirius, who was sitting up, his hands clenching his sheets.

And James and Lily felt a chill run down their spine. This new Sirius wasn't their Sirius. Haunted eyes, lined face, anger simmering in the air around him... this Sirius looked true to his Black legacy, cold and unforgiving, nothing like their light-hearted, womanizing Sirius.

James tried reasoning with himself. Twelve years of keeping Dementors company can destroy anybody...

But he couldn't lie to himself. He was afraid of his best friend.

"Dumbledore?" asked Sirius slowly, his dead eyes never leaving the old man's, the iciness in his voice increasing by several notches with every syllable. "Where did they take Bella?"

The room spun wildly for James when Dumbledore quietly said, "Azkaban."

!!!!!!!!!!!!

Fabian swallowed hard and wondered why he felt compelled to come here without Gideon. Maybe it was because he couldn't bear to see Alice and Frank like that... Maybe he just needed to do this alone...

He wondered if Sturgis would hold up without his help. He had recovered fairly fast, his life being less of a turmoil in the alternate universe. Both of them had watched helplessly as Alice fell apart while Frank continued to look like he was being forced to walk through his own personal hell. They had managed a few words but they didn't look right.

'What...' wondered Fabian, nails digging into his palm. 'do people with destroyed minds remember or perceive? What are they seeing in their heads? Will they become insane again?'

Fabian found himself wondering how he was going to break it to little eight-year old Natasha that her parents might show signs of partial insanity and that her dead older brother and Grandmother, whom she had never met, were alive again.

He stilled at the sound of a crack behind him and whipped his wand out a second later and spun on his toes and thrust his wand into the face of the person creeping up behind him. His own face stared back at him, twisted with anger that he did not feel.

"Gideon..." he mumbled, waiting for his older twin's wrath to break over him.

"You were planning to go without me?"

"I just needed to see her... them... Gide..."

"I know. Let's."

Relieved and terribly remorseful, Fabian lead the way up the rickety, crooked path till they reached the lopsided house that they had delighted in spending so many evenings, roaring with laughter as their poor brother-in-law covered as Molly broke out screaming at her children or him or them or the cauldron that had over-boiled. Swallowing hard, he stared up at the house that bore no signs of damage. The last time Gideon and him had torn up the path, they

had found the house blasted apart, the bloody remnants of their nephews spattered across their debris, their dead sister and husband at the heart of the rubble.

Gideon raised his hand to knock the door, his fists trembling. But even before his knuckles made contact with the wood, the door flew open to reveal a young, pretty red head whose eyes were wide and alight.

"Finally! Bella what happ..." she stopped dead and stared.

Her lips parted in a silent scream.

"Ginny?" called a young boy's voice. "Get Bella to come in! Stop harassing her on the doorstep!"

The twins looked helplessly as the niece they never met stepped back, looking as though she had seen a ghost.

'Which... as far as she's concerned, we probably are.'

Gideon, the ever not-so-tactful, burst out. "So you're the niece who got possessed by Voldemort! Seriously Ginny! What were you thinking! Um... Hi by the way?"

That was the last thing Ginny Weasley heard before she fainted from shock.

!!!!!!!!!!!!

Lily sat next to Remus in front of the fireplace, this time, with Remus holding her and trying to comfort her— a reversal of the morning's situation. Lily continued to stare at the flames, ghostly white and frighteningly expressionless.

"Lily... Scrimgeour will get her out..." whispered Remus, swallowing his own stress. "Bella's stronger than you think..."

"The Dementors are not on our side. Their loyalty lies with Voldemort here." James spoke blankly from the floor where he was seated. "In case your alternate reality... personality has given you some sort of partial amnesia, in this, our reality, Azkaban is not under our control."

"We don't know which version of Azkaban this reality has taken on..." Remus interjected, trying to bring some hope back in the room. "And even if it is your... our... Well if it's Voldemort's Azkaban that's come through, we still have time on our side. Unlike the Death Eaters, we do know what's going on... We'll have her out before they can get there."

Their terse musing was interrupted by the sound of loud footsteps reverberating through the house. Sirius strode into the room. He was fully cloaked, fingering his wand. He didn't spare them a glance as he pointed his wand to the door and unlocked and uninjured the wards.

"Paddy?" asked Remus uncertainly.

"I'm going to get her back."

"You can't go to Azkaban just like that! Are you insane?"

"Fuck you. You can sit here and contemplate her chances of survival. I'm going to actually do something and if you have an issue with that, you can go fuck yourself."

Remus jumped to his feet, looking absolutely furious.

"How dare you, you incorrigible asshole! Do you have any idea what you're saying? If you just saunter in there, you'll alert the Dementors, whether they work for the Ministry or Voldemort! You know their rule, you prick! At times of danger or attempted break-out, eliminate the prisoner! Your heroic rescue mission will only earn her the kiss!"

"I got out of there without their knowing. I can get in." he finished removing the wards and started to leave, when Remus strode forward and grabbed his arm roughly and shoved him back. His werewolf nature sprung alive and he bared his teeth, his eyes going dark with rage.

"We lost her once.... I'll be damned if we lose her again. I swear I will kill you if that's what it takes to keep you here."

Sirius' face mirrored Remus'. He raised his wand and pointed his wand at Remus' chest. "Come on wolf-boy... I dare you..."

A hand seized both their wand arms and gripped so hard it almost snapped their wrists. Lily was looking at them in absolute disbelieving revulsion. "What the hell is wrong with you two? You would actually dare to hurt each other? Who are you? The Sirius and Remus I know would never be like this!"

Her words shook them out of their rage bubble and they looked at one another before slowly lowering their wands. Sirius looked away and spoke to the wall behind Lily. "We're not what we used to be anymore... You don't know... You don't have a clue what it's like... Everything you know and understand, at constant war with a complete alternate version in your head." He snatched his hand from Lily's grip and whispered. "Your Sirius and Remus would never fight, but your Sirius and Remus didn't live the life our counterparts did."

Remus met her anguished gaze. "He's right Lily... It isn't just four of us anymore. Bella... She's everything to Sirius and me..."

Lily's final thread to her patience snapped and her anguish broke over them. "Everything?" she shrieked. "She's my daughter! My baby! James and I lost everything that night! It's always been the four of us Remus! The four of us buried my child! The four of us survived! The four of us have been fighting! I'm sorry James and I never lived in the alternate reality! I'm sorry we don't have two different personalities and memories destroying us! But don't you dare act as if you have propriety over our shared grief!"

"Lily..." whispered Remus, stricken. Lily turned to Sirius, grabbing him by the shoulder and forcing him to meet her eye. She stared into his haunted blue-grey orbs, desperately looking for the Sirius she knew in the stranger that stood before her. "She's my daughter. And the Sirius I know will know how much we've been falling apart since her death. You have to let us in... James and I... It's our right, as much as it's yours."

Sirius looked at her coldly. "If you really do care as much as I do, you'll let me go."

Lily shook him hard. "I will not allow you to endanger yourself or her and if you think that stems from me not caring, you can shove it, Sirius fucking Black!"

"And what should we do instead?" asked James coolly, speaking up for the first time, raising himself off the floor from where he had been watching the show-down. "Wait till the political shenanigans come to a halt and let the dust settle? Wait till Fudge and Scrimgeour fight it out? Wait till Dumbledore convinces the entire wizarding world of what has befallen?"

James stood next to Sirius, his face set. "Paddy, let's go."

Lily opened her mouth to argue when Sirius cut her off. "Bella's Boggart is a Dementor Lily. Surely you remember that?" James' mouth tightened at that.

Remus exhaled in defeat. He knew that only James could get through to Sirius and if he was choosing to take his side, they would go to Azkaban and nobody, not even a continent of giants could stop them. "We'll use the sea... we'll use a trawler - muggle style. It'll reduce any chances of having our magic traced before we reach the immediate vicinity of Azkaban. I recommend St. Petersburg as our port of departure. That's the easiest access to the Arctic Sea. We need to go 300 miles north-west into the water from there before we hit the wards. We'll tunnel through underwater."

James nodded, unsurprised by Remus caving in. He knew Lily would too. And most certainly...

"Well then, what are we waiting for?"

!!!!!!!!!!

Scrimgeour rubbed his temples and looked blearily at Dumbledore. "I had always hoped that the day would come when the Dark Lord would come second in my list of problems. I just never realized that I would live to regret I ever wished that. This is going to be a"

"Complete fiasco?" finished Dumbledore. "Bella Potter must be retrieved. We attack, irrespective of who Azkaban belongs too."

Scrimgeour sat up straighter, looking wary. "I don't think that's the right course of action. If they are on our side..."

"How does it matter? They will be Voldemort's soon. The only reason that they were loyal to the Ministry in one of the realities is because Voldemort had been vanquished. They would've betrayed them soon enough had the reality continued to exist."

Scrimgeour looked unconvinced. "I'll send the Aurors in. We'll find a way through and get her out. A direct attack will invoke retaliation!"

Dumbledore looked terribly displeased.

Scrimgeour glared at him fiercely. "Don't you dare try something Dumbledore. I'm the Prime Minister and as much as it irks you, I make the decisions here! I will send in the best. In fact, I'll get Potter and Black on it immediately. Merlin knows, they'll be thorough. Black won't let anyone harm a hair on his precious god-daughter's head and Potter will blast every defence to get to his kid."

Dumbledore smirked. "You really are a fool if you think they would be sitting and waiting for your orders. Send your team if you must Scrimgeour, and ask them to hurry. No doubt, they'll have to move fast to catch up with James Potter and Sirius Black. Oh, and best of luck with Fudge."

The door crashed open to reveal a dishevelled Cornelius Fudge. "You!" he shrieked at Dumbledore. "You did this didn't you? You're messing with everyone's head! This is what you've been developing? A curse to make us all lose our minds so that you can take over while commotion ensues!"

It was Scrimgeour's turn to smirk. "Right back at you, Dumbledore."

!!!!!!!!!!!!

The cold wind lashed ferociously, rocking the rickety boat violently. Four figures stood silhouetted against the black of the night, icy sea spray pelting them. Miles ahead, the fort of Azkaban stood forbidding and terrible, darker than the Arctic night in the background.

"James and I will go in. Moony, bring the boat as close to the wards as you can, just out of the ward boundaries. Start dismantling them." spoke up Sirius, finally breaking the silence that had settled between them as soon as they left Godric's Hollow.

Lily held out two wristbands. "They're charmed to change colours if you're trapped. The S.O.S signal will reach me. I have the fourth band which will change colour as well, if yours does. I will get back up, while Remus stays here and holds fort."

James turned to Sirius. "We go underwater and penetrate. We transform only on reaching the shore. You sure you remember the way in?"

Sirius smiled sardonically. "The route was branded in my brain forever by red hot adrenaline. Trust me... I know every inch of the path."

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A/N:

Just a quick reminder to all those of you who don't read chapters titled 'Author's Note'... I know I don't sometimes... *guilty, sheepish smile*

The previous chapter 'Phasing' was rewritten and if you've only read the first, small version, this chapter might throw you off a bit.

Cheers,

Broken Ink Bottles

!!!!!!!!!!

"Shut up shut up shut up shut up..." Bella whispered dryly, her fingernails scraping against the cold, dank walls while her legs twitched involuntarily, preparing to kick out against the unseen enemy. Her thin, green sweater hung raggedly around her shoulders, a very poor defence against the brain numbing chill that invaded her body. The Dementors marched outside her cell at regular, sequenced intervals, giving her no time to recover from each assault on her senses. But Bella, in her rare moments of sanity, perceived that something wasn't right. The first couple of hours she was sure she could hear only silence and the occasional whimper or two from prisoners, most of them Voldemort's followers, whose senses had been drained to the point of uselessness after years and years of subjection to the dreary horror that was Azkaban. But now there was constant screaming, like they were being tortured. 'Do Dementors physically torment their prisoners too?' Before she could dwell on it further, the cold overtook her thinking and she was sucked back into the seemingly endless void.

And then there was the sun. It had to be the sun. There was no other logical explanation for the slight rise in temperature. Bella willed her eyes open, desperate for the glimpse of miraculous light seeping into this very hell on Earth, terribly afraid that it might be her last time ever. Pitch black greeted her sight and she wondered if her delusions had led her astray again. But there was no denying that it was warmer. And not to mention the fact her head was slowly clearing up, like a solar charged LED responding to the sun's slow descent in the horizon. 'No Dementors...' she realized. She cautiously hoisted the upper part of her body on her elbows and

forced herself to look around wearily. Finding her assumption to be right, she felt a brief flare of relief. 'Remember who you are...' she begged herself. She desperately sought something, maybe a stone, to indent anything, even her name on the stony walls lest they returned and she forgot once more. She scrambled around her cell on her knees, far too weak to stand up, hands sweeping the frosty floors, looking for something that would help her.

A chilling, terrifying laugh made her pause. Bella looked up in the general direction of the laughter, wishing her eyes would adjust to the darkness faster. She could make out a blurry shape right across from her. Bella felt a stab of anger as she realized she was providing amusement for her neighbouring prisoner. She had to fight down murderous rage that being laughed at invoked. 'Always laughed at... Always the pathetic little girl nobody wants... Always the one beaten down and thrown into prisons...' Unbidden Cornelius Fudge's face swam before her eyes and Bella realized she wanted nothing more than to destroy him.

'I'll slit his throat and watch while he bleeds to death, choking on his own blood... I'll cut out his guts and splay it all over the Ministry of Magic for everyone to see... They'll know... They'll all know how damned wrong they were... They will pay for doing this to me...' Bella smiled in grim satisfaction, noting how the thought awoke no remorse or even shame. Suddenly, she wanted to kill them all. 'I will spare no one... I've had enough...'

"Well Well Well... So it is true... Little baby Potter has earned herself a cell! How... ironic..." The voice was definitely female and something about it made the hair on the back of her neck stand. Bella grit her teeth, mentally cursing her pupils. 'Widen a little faster damn it!'

"Lumos."

Bella hissed as the sudden light blinded her. She blinked furiously, terribly pissed off. Her inexplicably wild rage reared its head again and all she could think was 'I'm going to tear this bitch apart.'

Bella finally saw the figure in front of her in clear detail and wished she had stayed sightless instead. The woman in front of her was tall, swarthy and beautiful. Her expression was deadly and cruel. Amidst

her bemusement, Bella felt a twinge of apprehension. 'This is a woman to be reckoned with...'

Bill Weasley, after one of the order meetings, had stayed back for dinner and after way too much mead, had slipped his arm around her and pulled her unnecessarily close, much to Sirius' displeasure and murmured "You, Bella, could be anybody's dream girl... Beautiful, witty, intelligent and fiery... But by Isis, you are a dark beauty... There's something forbidding about you, you know that?"

Bella continued to stare at this woman whose presence had released the strange memory she hadn't thought much of till now, hoping Bill was wrong. If Bella was a dark beauty, then she was like this woman and that thought did nothing to cheer her.

"Welcome to ... my... or rather the world Bella Potter." The woman smiled at her, the gesture doing nothing to soften the clear cut malice on her features. "You haven't met me before ... My name is Bellatrix Lestrange... and oddly enough, I'm often called Bella." she let out a piercing laugh that sounded strangely hysterical. Bella wondered where she had heard of this woman, whose name set off alarm bells in her head.

"My being your namesake amuses you? You must be one of Voldemort's lot then..." Bella mused out loud, surprised that her voice sounded clear and not raspy like she expected. 'I guess it hasn't been months or years in this hell-hole, like I imagined.'

Bellatrix's smile slipped at the mention of Voldemort. "Never," she hissed, looking maniacally furious, "dare to utter my master's name with your filthy halfblood tongue!"

Bella suddenly realized where she heard of Bellatrix. "You tortured the Longbottoms..." she murmured. "Crouch junior's pal aren't you?"

Bellatrix smiled again, looking thoroughly pleased. "Oh yes! I was quite delighted by that memory! Longbottom and his wife have been a thorn on my side and I always regretted that we never managed to kill them along with their filthy little boy. But turns out I managed to inflict some damage in the other timeline! I can't tell you how delightful I found replaying that in my head!"

Bella tried to process her words and found that it made absolutely no sense to her. 'Azkaban's done her in...' she decided, when suddenly she realized that Bellatrix was not inside the opposite cell as she first assumed. She was standing tall, well dressed, armed with a wand and right outside the bars of her own cell. Bella felt the alarm bells get louder in her ears. 'What the fuck is going on...'

Bellatrix smiled wider at Bella's confusion and alarm. "Oh little baby Bella..." she crooned. "Don't over-think your pretty head about it... It'll be over soon enough for you and it's rather irrelevant to explain. But I must admit, I find it an absolute waste of irony if you don't realize the hilarity of the situation wherein your dear Auror father finds his own daughter dead in the cells of Azkaban, considering how many of our side he threw in here before it fell to my master's hands."

Bella swallowed hard, trying not to get worked up.

"You've lost your mind." She told Bellatrix bluntly. "Fucking barking mad. Voldemort's going to be sorry to find that one of his precious side-kicks has gone stark raving mad. He probably doesn't have much use for psychos does he? Oh wait... Come to think of it, you'll fit right in."

Bellatrix laughed out loud again, looking positively delighted. She practically bounced on her heels, like a child visiting the circus for the first time. "Oh this is so much fun! I found master's explanation unbelievable and I admit, even I thought I was losing my mind when my memories collided. But oh this is just wonderful!"

Bella grit her teeth frustrated. 'What is she saying?'

Bellatrix finally stopped laughing and looked at Bella indulgently. "Well then... It was nice meeting you Bella. Do forgive me for the pain. I wish I could say I'm sorry but I really am not. It's a bit of a signature of mine... I find it exquisite... The pain before the release... I wonder, how long will it take for you to beg for your death, Bella? Crucio!"

!!!!!!!!!!

James hauled himself up using the rocks that were precariously placed at the shore, shaking his sopping wet hair out of his eyes.

Sirius had already clambered up and pulled him up the rest of the way. They glanced up at the high walls, the wind whistling in their ears. Sirius closed his eyes and stayed still.

"They're here... Outside... I can feel them... Half a kilometre in... Just along the inner walls... They're moving in ranks... "

James shuddered. All he could feel was the cold and the forlorn air. He wondered how Sirius specifically managed to sense the Dementors in the vicinity. 'Twelve years... Azkaban... Do we need to go through this again?' his brain chided.

He winced and turned to look away, trying not to stare at Sirius, whose lean frame was so rigid and his face closed and grim. It was so un-Sirius-like that it troubled him. "This is definitely Voldemort's Azkaban." muttered James. "That Ministry outpost at the east side has a lighthouse that always beams into the sea... I haven't seen it... It was destroyed, no doubt... And no wizard-run patrol boats in the perimeter ... And far too many Grindylows and Krakens in the sea."

Sirius nodded in agreement. "It feels worse than ... before. I never thought that would be a distinct possibility."

James hesitated, then reached out and touched his shoulder. "Paddy... You survived. She will too, won't she? Moony says she's tough but..."

"I don't know..." whispered Sirius brokenly as they moved stealthily towards the walls. "She can't handle even a few seconds around them... And she doesn't have her wand to drive them away..."

James felt a wave of fury. "They actually snapped her wand?"

Sirius shook his head. He reached inside his robes and pulled out a slender wooden stick. James stared at it. "Is that..."

"Her wand." Sirius hesitated before whispering. "I think... She's keeping something from me James... She seemed keen on protecting the wand. She gave it to me before going in, saying she wanted it kept safe at all costs..."

James wasn't really listening. He held out his hand. "May I?" Sirius handed it to him and James hands shook as he slowly ran his

fingers over Bella's wand. He wanted to keep it. It made him feel closer to the daughter he never saw grow up and whom he mourned for fourteen years. The wand was hers. She had touched it, used it, carried it around with her and forsaken it to protect it. It was the wand she bought alone, orphaned and unaccompanied by Lily and him.

"This is it." Sirius broke him out of his sad musing. James squinted into the dark wall, spotting a minute opening. "I think it was used as a drainage exit when the fort was not a prison. Thankfully it's redundant now and it leads into the outer ring of cells. I'm afraid we're going to have to fight the Dementor guards between the inner and outer ring to reach Bella, but that can be minimised by transforming. They get confused with animal emotions."

"A Shrinking charm?" asked James eyeing the opening that was in no way large enough to accommodate them in their current forms and sizes. "It'll set off the Magic Tracer charms... We have to be quick."

They both pointed their wands at themselves and whispered, "Witherius."

!!!!!!!!!!!!

Bellatrix paused, cocking her head to one side, looking at the prone figure in front of her with part curiosity and part irritation. The girl was being subjected to the Cruciatus curse for the last ten minutes and was showing absolutely no sign of breaking. Hell, she wasn't even screaming. If it weren't for the expression on her face, contorted with pain, her eyes gritted, holding in her agony, Bellatrix would've wondered if she even felt the curse. She was intrigued. The girl was fighting, clearly determined not to give any leeway for Bellatrix to assume she had the upper-hand.

"Fascinating." murmured Bellatrix. "I wonder... Imperio!"

Potter's eyes glazed over and Bellatrix proceeded, "Tell me Potter... How is it that a sick, filthy, halfblood puppy like you could overcome my master? Answer me!"

Bellatrix felt a twinge of unease as she saw the struggle in the girl's eyes. She was fighting it. "Answer me now!" commanded Bellatrix,

determined to break through her defences, her unease growing. 'She's barely fifteen years old! It's impossible ... Not even the most powerful wizards and witches can resist the Imperius curse, not scream at the Cruciatus or survive the Avada Kedavra! She's done all three..."

For a moment, Bellatrix thought she had triumphed. The girl's expression became un-conflicted. And then she said, "Wouldn't you like to know, you dumb whore..."

Bellatrix snarled, thoroughly infuriated. "You'll pay for that one, little Potter! Crucio! CRUCIO!"

!!!!!!!

Sirius moved silently, his paws enabling him to move without the sound of footsteps. As he expected, the Dementors barely moved his way. James' walked slower, behind him, taking care that his hoofs made the slightest sound against the stone floors. As Padfoot and Prongs, they slowly crept their way into the inner ring, traipsing around the hooded creatures, their animal instincts tuning out the bad memories, sadness and terrible images to a slightly hazier quality, like a couple of digits off the required radio station.

Relief swept over them as they finally slipped into the innermost circle of corridors, completely devoid of Dementors. Both of them changed back into their human forms, hurrying past the many prone figures in the cells, all in various stages of despair and insanity, completely oblivious to the sudden appearance of the two Aurors.

James glanced at them guiltily but Sirius shook his head. "Not this time... We will return and get them out... But now..."

"I know." replied James softly.

As they crept closer, an unmistakably female soprano voice reached them. They stopped dead, tense, their wands drawn out.

"I know that voice... And by all that's burning in Tartarus, I fucking hate that voice..." hissed Sirius venomously. James narrowed his eyes. "The fools... They didn't think we could get past the ring of Dementors and left this place completely unguarded... We storm in."

Taking a deep breath, they threw themselves around the corridor just as Bellatrix shrieked, "Crucio!"

"Stupefy!" roared James, running at her.

"What the..." gasped Bellatrix, distracted but managing to duck the jet of red light coming at her. Sirius slammed his shoulder against hers, sending her tumbling into the ground. Before she could get up, James yelled, "Petrificus Totalus!"

Her eyes seethed with horror and disbelief.

"One for us tonight! What a bonus..." laughed James. "Who was the poor soul she was venting on?"

On receiving no reply, he looked at Sirius. His stomach dropped at the Sirius' expression. He was staring at the prisoner in the cell, like he had finally seen light at the end of a long, dark light. His eyes burned like the core of the sun. James moved his eyes to the prisoner.

His breath caught in his throat. She was young... very young. She was beautiful. Her face was drawn and ghostly white. Her thin frame was wrapped in nondescript, form-fitting muggle clothes – a thin green sweater and skin-tight black jeans. Her green eyes were cold and closed off. Green eyes... James fell to the floor, his knees giving way as he stared at the girl, a tidal wave of emotion crashing over him.

Her eyes were fixed on James's face. "Bella..." he whispered, her name coming out like a prayer.

She started, her expression going wild. She propelled herself backwards, using her hands and feet. "Tell Voldemort..." she hissed, "That he's gone too far. Tell him... I'll destroy him. I'll fucking find him and make him scream... Tell your fucking master that if he thinks I'm soft in the head and I'll fall for his stupid tricks, he has something else coming."

James flinched at the violence in her eyes, at the harsh words. But she wasn't done.

She looked at him venomously. "And when I'm done with him, I'll find you... You fucking asshole of a death eater... I will feed your limbs to the fucking Blast Ended Skrewts and watch you scream... I'll fucking make you beg for death, I'll fucking make you suffer for your cheap, lowly trick..."

Sirius pointed his wand at the bars and they snapped open. Bella threw herself back further into the darker recess of the cell, her eyes turned on him now, while James watched, paralysed as his daughter shuddered with hate of insurmountable intensity.

Sirius strode inside and roughly grabbed her arm. She cried out and struggled. "Let me go!"

Sirius tightened his grip on her, grabbing her other arm, preventing her from striking him. She struggled harder, her eyes burning with sudden helpless tears. She writhed and jerked in his arms, her face a mask of anger and despair as Sirius held her tighter and snarled at her, "Bella stop it!"

She let out a soft cry of pain as Sirius gripped her harder and James snapped out of it.

"Stop it!" he roared. "You're fucking hurting her!"

"Prongs, shut up and go... Clear the way out and do a preliminary scouting of the path we used to get in!"

James however stepped forward, fierce. Sirius growled at him. "You have plenty of time later to be the protective dad. Your presence is making it worse. Go. I SAID GO!"

James deflated, knowing Sirius was right. He gave one last glance at Bella, who was now limp in Sirius' arms and strode outside, forgetting all about Bellatrix who was lying on the floor, her eyes watching him, promising vengeance.

!!!!!!!!!!

"You let them go alone?" Kingsley and Tonks looked at Remus and Lily in disbelief. The trawler wobbled with the sheer number of people on it. It looked like the entire Auror force was on it. Which was probably true.

"They'll be fine." said Remus calmly. "I, on the other hand, need some help. I'm trying to remove the anti-apparation ward. I could do with some man-power. Volunteers?"

Kingsley gave him a look of deepest disapproval but Tonks quickly cut in. "What can we do?" She looked at Remus intently, who felt flustered all of a sudden. "Er... just get me more people. We'll position ourselves in a straight file along the edge of the boat. I've located the focal point of the ward and if we hit it, we can break the it."

Within minutes, over ten Aurors stood along the edge of the boat, with eight people standing on the other side to balance the weight.

"Now." commanded Remus. All of them raised their wands to their shoulder level and chanted the incantation.

Lily stood at the prow, her eyes on the band, tersely waiting for any change in colour.

Minutes passed and the powerful anti-apparation ward around Azkaban began to falter, as did the Aurors. And the band changed colour.

"Remus, pick up pace." shouted Lily, over the murmuring Aurors, panicking. The Aurors summoned their last strand of energy and put more power behind their chanting and the air shimmered slightly before the dark sky returned to normal.

Two loud cracks grabbed their attention and right in the middle of the deck, stood James Potter and Sirius Black, the latter holding an unconscious young girl in his arms.

The air around them became thick with fog and they felt a cold sweep into their very bones.

"The Dementors have been alerted!" yelled Sirius. "Quick, now! Apparate back to base!"

The hooded creatures flew into the trawler seconds later, only to find a slightly swaying boat, empty, having the minute, fading traces of magic – the only residue of apparating wizards.

Natasha Longbottom wasn't stupid. Sure, there were a million things that seemed a bit out of reach for understanding when you're eight years old, but there is good old keen perception and intuition, both of which she was blessed with in abundance. And staring up at her bedroom ceiling trying – and failing- to sleep, Natasha pondered the complexity of the adult human mind. It had been a strange week. And at the end of it she hardly knew how she was supposed to feel about all of it.

Her parents would normally be asleep in the next room, unless they were out on one of their mysterious jaunts (they never realized that their daughter was well aware when the house was devoid of other people, save the family house elf Wisps). Natasha hoped they were out, partly because she had business with the sudden new-old family member, and partly because they unsettled her. She was told they'd come around but Natasha was keen on keeping them out of her vicinity till such time.

Kingsley Shacklebolt had volunteered to sit the little girl down and explain the whole bizarre business of having worlds mesh and so on and so forth. Perhaps it was Natasha's inherent maturity or it had to do with Kingsley's patient, deep voice as he explained as simply as possible, but she had taken it fairly well. Her alarm at her parent's change, perceptible even to those who didn't know them as well as she did, was offset by the intrigue she felt at meeting the pale, terribly shaken boy who she'd only heard of in his hushed whispers. Natasha's parents mostly never spoke about their first-born, but her great-uncle Algie had told her the story. And now, she wanted to see him. She couldn't understand why everyone seemed so cautious and terrified of one another and were trying to be gentle with her and try and keep her from her brother. "He needs time Tasha." Kingsley told her gently. "As do you. This is all a bit too much to take and we need to give him and your parents time to slowly deal with it."

Natasha had huffed in annoyance. "But why? My brother's not dead anymore! That's good news right? What's to get used to?"

Kingsley had sighed and ruffled her hair affectionately before saying, "I wish I were eight years old too." And that was the first time Natasha was glad she was the baby too, because it seemed to be the reason she wasn't being stupid like everybody else.

She quietly crept out of her room, stopping to peek into her parents' room. She was unsurprised to see that it was empty. She carefully made her way down and tip-toed till she reached the door of the room Neville was supposed to be in. Carefully, she pushed the door open and looked keenly at the boy sitting at the edge of the bed, his back to her, his head in his hands.

"Hi." Her voice was the softest of whispers, but it sent him jumping a foot high.

Neville stared at the little girl. His adam's apple bobbed furiously as he struggled to summon speech. Natasha waited with mounting impatience, finally giving up with a sigh. She walked into his room and cheerfully threw herself on his bed, missing the way his eyes widened with alarm. She kneeled and drew her upper body to the maximum height possible and said chirpily, "I'm Natasha! I'm your sister! I said so downstairs yesterday but I don't think you really heard me."

Neville blinked. "Er... Hi... I'm Neville..."

"I know. Uncle Algie told me. You-Know-Who killed you when you were a baby, even smaller than I am now."

Neville flinched at that. Natasha supposed that may have been unnecessary information to bring up and hastily tried to make amends. "Sorry sorry sorry... That won't give you nightmares will it? Daddy says we shouldn't talk about scary stuff before sleeping, 'cause that'll give us nightmares."

"That's one of the many things in the long list of what's keeping me up." mumbled Neville, clearly talking more to himself than her, but she heard anyway.

"Oh. Do you want hot cocoa? It makes me sleep, even after Bertie Heggles tells me stories about hags and vampires."

Neville looked at her and suddenly, a brilliant smile cracked through his tense expression, surprising Natasha with his resemblance to her mum. "I like cocoa too!" he told her brightly. "Especially when you dip Chocolate frogs in them."

Natasha wrinkled her nose. "I've never tried that..."

"You should!"

Natasha nodded, her mind made up. "Come on! Wisps will be up and he won't tell anybody if we sneak some Chocolate Frogs." She enthusiastically jumped down from his bed and held out her hand. And Neville marvelled the way with which he easily slipped his hand around her tiny ones, like he had spent his entire life sneaking off to the kitchens with his baby sister at the dead of the night.

And as they crept down the stairs, hushing one another, for the first time in a week, Neville breathed with ease.

Wisps had bowed to Neville too and called him 'Master Neville'. Natasha concluded that house-elves and eight year olds were equally smart. She proceeded to drag him to a cushy armchair in the den. The night wore on, their cocoa mugs long drained of any cocoa. Natasha had started with sitting beside him and finally wound up on his lap, as they continued to regale the other with various stories from their lives.

"Do you think he'll..." began Alice for the hundredth time that night, as they slipped into the house through the kitchen door.

Frank shrugged wearily. Between having to fight off his other consciousness' urge to slip into blank nothingness, make sense of what was going on and suddenly deal with the fact that his son and mother were alive once more, he was sure he was going to go mad anyway... twelve years of insanity mingled in his head or otherwise. Alice had fretted non-stop about Neville dealing with it. Frank honestly thought he was probably dealing with it better than him and his wife. They hadn't even spoken to their son, who had locked himself in his room, too unsettled (or too angry or too messed up... Frank couldn't tell) while Alice and him had flitted between the Dumbledore's office, Godric's Hollow and the Ministry to help sort out the disaster brewing rapidly. The spare moments were spent in his own head, sorting out the mess in there.

Alice caught him by the arm. "Frank... we have to face this now. Our son is alive once more and irrespective of what our obligations to the order or the world outside are, we have to talk! We're a complete family again and no... It will not sort out on its own."

"My mum is handling it fine! Uncle Algie's been saying she's completely normal again, just like before she died! He just needs time before he comes up to us."

"My son is not of the same temperament as Augusta!"

"How would you know? Like you've even spoken to him..."

"Nobody has your mother's temperament!"

"I can't believe you're starting off on my mum now even when we're in the thick of..."

"Do not hide behind your mother Frank! Can you please man up and face our son?"

"And tell him what exactly? Hullo Neville... Sorry your greatest level of interaction with us happened when we were out of our minds in a ward at Mungo's. Never mind all that. Let's forget fourteen years of your life and start all over. Who's your Quidditch team? What is your breakfast preference? And while you're at it, please come and give your mother and me a hug and let us know you're not some illusion that's coming to haunt us, digging up everything we've tried to put aside and live again after your death... How about that Alice? Does that sound alright to you?"

Alice glared at him, tears in her eyes. "Oh Brilliant!"

Frank deflated at her tears. "Al... I don't know what to do. I want to talk to him so bad... But I don't know where to start... And neither do you, admit it, or you would be tucking him in bed and not coaxing me to come with you and start..."

"I'm afraid..." whispered Alice. "What if he's taking it badly, like Bella?"

Both of them shuddered at that, their pity for James and Lily mounting. Atleast Neville had resorted to silence and isolation. Bella, on the other hand, had been downright verbose and her distrust and anger still rang in their ears.

"That's what I'm afraid of too..." admitted Frank, tiredly. "I can't Al... I wouldn't be able to take it if Neville pushes us away..."

Alice sighed and took his hand. She started to say something and stopped. Her eyes grew as wide as saucers as she in the scene before her. Frank had gone completely still next to her.

Neville and Natasha were both curled up in the plush armchair, the latter cuddled up against her brother, his arms around her. Both of them were fast asleep, with slight smiles on their faces.

Frank turned to his wife. "Huh... Turns out Natasha is a pro at handling colliding universe crises. Think we should loan her to Lily and James?"

The flame flickered with a strange green tongue, throwing eerie lights around the dungeon. Severeus Snape looked at it absently, distractedly fingering the edges of the worn book in his hand. Bella Potter sat in the chair in front of the fire, carved in the exact same position as she had when she settled herself there five days ago.

The room was an offshoot of the Hogwarts dungeon, a place he no longer could call his territory, because Slughorn was the Potions Master in this reality. Snape still wasn't sure how he felt about being ousted from his post for no fault of his, but Dumbledore assured him that he wouldn't have time for teaching anyway. As to what Dumbledore had lined up for him was beyond his comprehension. Spying, obviously was out of question. Like a lot of people, he couldn't just get on with what his counterpart had been doing because he had been killed years ago. And Snape hardly felt up to integrating with the order again.

She would be there. Snape convulsed at the thought. He had been turning the whole idea in his head over and over again and yet he found no finish line, no respite.

"Are you still with us, Severus?" Dumbledore had asked him, a week back, after he had finally been given an explanation as to why Kreacher had gone berserk and a very alive Walburga Black had gone wild at finding him at the kitchen at Grimmauld Place. If it weren't for Dumbledore's timely intervention, a very shocked Severus would've definitely killed her.

Severus gave him a swift, cold look. "Obviously."

Dumbledore had nodded and left the matter at that, but his unasked question lingered in the air. Why?

'Why indeed...' Snape wondered later, as he sat in his new den, swirling a glass of wine. His entire purpose, his life had been to fix the wrong; to honour the memory of the only woman he ever loved and who was a true friend to him. But now, she was alive and well. And yet Snape found that he could not disassociate himself from the cause. He still hadn't summoned the courage to face her, in person. The various letters and notes, passed down through Dumbledore, were shoved into his desk draw, rumpled and creased from all the times he read and re-read them.

Sev,
Please... I need to see you. It's been too long and too many wrongs to answer for. I just want a chance to say I'm sorry. To say you're forgiven. To start over.
Love,
Lily

Sev,
Are you angry? Is it too late? Why won't you come?
Love,
Lily

Sev,
Please, I'm begging you. You owe me. You owe it to us.
Love,
Lily

Sev,
James says you're doing this to spite us. I know you aren't. If anything, you'll make her understand. What's done can never be undone. You and I know that better than anybody else. If I could do it again, we would've stayed friends and you'd have been my best man at my wedding. But how time mocks us, consequences of our actions staring us in our face...
James wants his daughter back. I want BOTH of you back.
I'll be waiting, for as long as it takes.
Love,
Lily

Sev,

Take care of her. Tell her, we love her. And know that you will always be my best friend.

Bring her back when she's ready... When you're ready.

Love,

Lily

Severus closed his eyes and sighed. The last time he had been called 'Sev' he was fifteen years old, on his way to write his DADA OWL.

Severus knew why he would never go back or stay silent. He knew why he would fight and give up his life. He wouldn't be able to let Lily fall again.

And now, even as his obligation to honour Lily's memory came to a close, it was Bella that anchored him, kept him where he was.

He eyed the girl, troubled by her silence and listlessness.

She had floo'ed herself to Dumbledore's office a day after she had opened her eyes. Dumbeldore had already been deeply troubled by her unwillingness to accept her parents. It had already taken a lot of energy to convince her that she wasn't going mad or that it was dark magic, muddling with her brains. Her appearance at Hogwarts, looking empty and oddly fixed, shortly after he left her at Godric's Hollow, did nothing to ease him. Without as much as looking at the old man, she proceeded down to the dungeons till she bumped into him. Without a word, she settled herself on that chair and had more or less stayed there for five days.

Severus wasn't sure whether she had come looking for him or she just happened to chance upon him. Either way, the fact that she found solace in his company unsettled him. Dumbledore had stared after her in amazement while Severus seethed.

"She needs you." Dumbeldore told him, cutting him off mid rant.

"Excuse me?"

"You symbolize stability for her. It's almost as if she knows what to expect from you. I think she feels safe with you, in a way that she doesn't even with Sirius or Remus."

"Is this your idea of a joke Dumbledore? What about our relationship makes her feel safe? My constant threats or jabs at her? The fact that I positively loathe her?"

Dumbledore gave him a quiet smile. "Of all the people in the world you wanted to fool with your facade, Severus, she would've been on top of the list. Oddly enough, she sees through you, past you, in a way none of us can."

With that, he swept out of the room, looking peaceful, leaving Severus blinking in astonishment.

At first, he had furiously ignored her. But that night, when she fell asleep on the chair, he hadn't been able to stop himself from picking her up and carrying her to his bed. He slept on the couch, waking up everytime she stirred and cried softly, murmuring and pleading incomprehensibly. He fed her calming Draught and a Sleeping potion, trying to ease the souvenirs from Azkaban away. Quietly, they had settled into silent companionship, taking meals together, occasionally passing a remark or two, and mostly letting the comfortable silence stay.

Severus sometimes wondered if this is what letting someone into your life meant.

He stared at the bunch of letters in his hand and suddenly felt weak in his knees. Even her handwriting could still make him feel eight years old. Before he could stop himself he looked at Bella and said, "Fate's a moody bitch. Second chances never come our way. A third is beyond the scope of our wildest dreams. Where does that leave us, Potter?"

"I need to see her." Sirius told Dumbledore bluntly.

"Leave her be, Sirius. She'll come to you when she wants to."

"You're doing this on purpose! What are doing with her? How could you let her stay with him?"

"I didn't do anything. She chose to go to him."

The words were like a knife twisting in his gut. The fact that Bella had gone to Snivellus looking for some sort of peace or comfort infuriated him. She was his. Only his.

Anger, confusion, hurt and jealousy mingled and made him vicious and unreasonable, often lashing out at Lily, who had told him and James to lay off when they had set out to curse Snivellus to the very pits of hell and bring her back home.

"She's my baby girl. I know she'll come back. I just know it. Sev will take care of her. We're just overwhelming her."

After a particularly cold lashing out session at Lily, Remus had disarmed him and punched him.

"Behave yourself or I'll tell Lily and James why you find it so difficult to sleep alone now." Remus hissed in his ear. The threat did not go unheeded.

James shook the water out of his hair, tired and weary. He crossed the Hogwarts gate and made his way up to the castle. He was there on official business but he couldn't help but allow temptation to snake its way in. Bella was in the castle, down in the dungeons with Snivellus. If he could just sneak down, disobey Lily, Remus and Dumbledore...

'Who are they to tell me when I can and cannot see my own child?' he thought indignantly.

Then he sighed. He knew they were right. Bella had been so spooked and it wouldn't help in the least if he imposed himself on her.

"Impervious." he muttered, pointing his wand at his glasses and hair, fed up of battling the rain trickling down his face, wondering why he didn't think of this before. He paused near the mouth of the path that led to the Quidditch pitch and let pangs of longing consume him. Sometimes, he wished he had just given the world the finger and taken up professional Quidditch.

He paused then decided he could spare a few minutes. He hurried down the path and let out a contented sigh as it opened out to the

vast pitch. He looked about wistfully at the empty stands. Then stopped dead.

In the foremost stall, a figure wearing flowing black cloak, sat hunched staring into the pitch, with a wistfulness that was very similar to his.

James swallowed hard. He hesitated then let his feet move forward. Step after step, he got closer. Finally, he was standing right next to her, taking in her long damp black hair. All he could think was, 'Turns out Lily needn't have worried that much about her having my hair. It looks nice when it's long.'

She glanced up at him and his wife's green eyes pierced him. He waited with bated breath for her to get up and run away. She didn't. James dared to take a seat next to her, their shoulders touching.

He didn't know what to say. A hundred possible starting lines bombarded him.

How you holding up kiddo?

Snape hasn't messed with you much as he?

So... Hungry or something?

I love you.

James opened his mouth and closed it again, irritated at his own nervousness. But he was spared the need to attempt being verbal, shocking him as she spoke first instead.

"The first thing I learnt about you was that you were a fantastic Chaser. McGonagall told me that just after she made me Seeker for Gryffindor. I didn't know a thing about my parents, apart from the fact that they were heroes. I was so proud and so happy. It was the first connection I had to the father I never knew. She said you'd have been proud."

James' throat unstuck.

"I am. My kid is the youngest player in a century. That's the stuff of dreams."

They grinned at each other. Then her smile faded.

"I'm Parseltongue. The Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin. I watched my friend die at Voldemort's hands and I could do nothing to save him. I'm angry all the time; I take it out on people I care about the most; I'm reckless; with the exception of DADA, I have average grades; I don't make friends easily and sometimes I'm afraid of myself and what I've become. I come with phenomenal baggage and seriously dysfunctional. I'm not easy to be proud of."

She stopped and closed her eyes, waiting for the rejection, the disgust, the scorn...

His hand gripped her shoulders tentatively.

"I'm even more proud of you now, than I was a minute ago. That's something I didn't think was possible."

They stared at one another – James, with a calm smile, his eyes shining. Bella felt something give way and hesitantly reached for his other hand. Suddenly she frowned. "What are you doing here? I told Dumbledore..."

James jumped up, smacking his hand on his forehead. "Damn! Forgot! Dumbledore will be waiting. Hang on... I'll tell him I'll see him later."

He pulled out his wand and muttered under his breath. Bella started as a huge, majestic lion fell forth from his wand before taking off.

"Your Patronus is a lion?" she asked in amused astonishment.

"Yeah. Why?"

"And the clichés abound..."

James smirked, as always proud of his Gryffindor heritage. Then curiously, "I know you can produce one but what is it? I never found out."

Bella looked at him for a moment before holding up her wand. "Expecto Patronum."

James felt his throat constrict.

"It's Prongs."

James pulled her into his arms and held her as she finally cried, this time in relief. He stroked her hair and rocked her, forgetting the world outside the two of them.

"Welcome home, Bella." whispered James.

Severus leisurely sipped his pumpkin juice, well aware that he had an audience.

"You're back." he finally said, knowing well that the silent spectre behind would never be the one to break the quiet.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I thought I'll go... home. But I don't know if I want to. Yet."

"Understandable. I suppose it goes without saying that you're always welcome here."

It was his turn to be asked "Why?"

"I don't know."

"Understandable."

He almost smiled at the way she even mimicked the devoid-of-emotion tone in which he said the same words.

He nodded towards the bedroom. "I've taken the liberty of adding another bed. The couch was losing its appeal."

"Sorry." He knew she meant her apology.

"Did you, at any point during your teary reunion with your father, hint that you may not go back with him as soon as his meeting with Dumbledore is over?"

"I didn't get the chance to. He won't take it well, will he?"

"Would you take it lightly if it were you?"

"I'm not my father."

"I know, Potter. But I wasn't asking for James Potters' perspective. I was asking for a parent's."

"How should I know?"

"Don't tempt Karma, Potter. Your father is already paying his due share by having you chose me over him. I won't be surprised if you end up with a child who decides to marry Draco Malfoy."

"Malfoy would be old enough to be her father... Ok forget I said that."

Severus smirked into his juice. "And not that it's any of my business but you might want to see Black. He's losing his sanity and given that he didn't have much of it to begin with, the thought isn't comforting."

"Hmmm."

Snape sighed. "I never thought I'd ever champion Sirius Black's cause but you're killing him Potter. You're not being fair."

"He's not the same. There's an entire another life in him now. I could see it in his eyes. He doesn't... he won't..." she broke off and stared into the fire, unable to word what had been haunting her.

"Want you." finished Severus. He wondered if he should tell her that it was impossible. Hundreds of alternate lives could merge into Black's conscience and he would still pick her. But the bitterness that always lingered beneath the surface, reared its ugly head. Joining forces with his newly found possessiveness of Bella Potter and the desire to protect her from harm, it told him to shut up.

"Would that be so bad, Potter? You could do better. You always could."

She didn't say anything.

"Cedric Diggory is alive. And from what Dumbledore has told me, he's very similar to the one we've known. He has joined forces with the order."

Bella shook slightly, shutting her eyes tightly. "He was a friend."

"Is a friend. Friendship isn't the end or a definitive border. It can often be the beginning of greater things. I know for a fact, he was in love with you."

"And since when have you become a PA for Cedric Diggory? Or taken an active interest in my love life? You really hate Sirius, don't you?"

"Despise him. The only reason I haven't killed him is because I can't decide what would be the most painful way to go about it. My greatest failing with you, apart from the fact that you can't stand even stand a cauldron the right way, has been my inability to save you from him."

"He's the one that needs saving. And just out of curiosity, why aren't you marketing Blaise? He was the only one I came close to liking in that sense, apart from Sirius."

"You seem to have a penchant for picking useless, spoiled, rich, pureblood heirs. How truly ironic, given who and what you are."

Bella absently brushed the hair out of her eyes and looked up at the towering gargoyles guarding Dumbledore's office.

"Cockroach Clusters." The gargoyles jumped out of the way and she made her way up, amused by her right guess. Apart from the first time she had visited his office, escorted by McGonagall, way back in second year, she had always been able to guess his passwords. More often than not, she just made random choices but she had always been right, at the very first guess. She strongly suspected it had very little to do with the candy she picked; rather, Dumbledore must've have cast a spell on the entrance that would enable her to enter, irrespective of what atrocious guess she made. She wondered if she should just blab random nonsense the next time to see if her hypothesis was correct.

Even before she raised her hand to knock, the door was thrown open. Sirius stood in front of her, looking at her grimly.

"Ah... I was right. Come in, Bella." Dumbledore's mild voice called from behind him.

Bella edged her way around Sirius, careful not to look at his face. Her arm lightly brushed against her and it sent tingles down her skin. She walked resolutely to one of the empty armchairs, pausing long enough to give James a thoroughly embarrassed, small smile. He

grinned back at her, his eyes sparkling. She could feel Sirius right behind her, the back of her loose jumper occasionally making contact with the front of his robes.

'The chair next to Dumbledore, far away from both of them.' she told herself.

But James had other ideas. He jumped up from his seat and hugged her. Bella blinked in bemusement. The only person to hug her like this had been Remus. It was so fatherly and comforting; it made her feel wanted and safe. Bella groaned internally as her own longing to go back home with James intensified. 'Stay strong Potter.' she told herself firmly. 'You're no fairytale princess to fall for all this mush.'

She gently pulled herself from James' arms and awkwardly punched his shoulder in what she hoped was an off-hand manner. Judging from his amused smirk, the gesture had been more comical than anything else. "Well funny is better than weepy." she consoled herself. She quickly put some distance between them and dropped into the chair next to Dumbledore, sparing him a dirty look on noticing the way his lips twitched.

"So I take it that you and Jamie boy have come to some sort of understanding." Sirius said rather coolly. His face was expressionless and his tone a bit condescending. Bella narrowed her eyes dangerously.

"Yeah. Not that it's any of your business."

Sirius glared at her but he was cut off by James.

"That's no way to talk to him, Bella. He's your godfather! He's just been worried about you."

Bella blinked at the reprimand. It sounded alien. Nobody ever told her what to do and now she was being told off for returning Sirius' crap behaviour?

'I'd forgotten that this whole parental thing comes with bizarre expectations.'

"Sorry." Her disgruntled apology was directed at James, something Sirius didn't fail to notice.

"We were just discussing our plans for the order, Bella." Dumbledore finally spoke up, fearing that if he didn't, a full scale explosion would occur.

Bella leaned forward, immediately distracted. "Brilliant. I was just thinking about it. We've been quiet for a few days now. I know Voldemort's camp will be equally disoriented, but they will strike, Dumbledore. Particularly given that the wizarding world is still in a complete disarray!"

"I agree with Bella. The muggles aren't the only weak points now. They can launch a full scale attack on the Ministry and we'll be sitting ducks!" said Sirius.

"And there is the matter of infiltration in the Ministry. In all the confusion, Voldemort can comfortably set up spies. Hell, forget spies. A lot of the officials from our reality were Death Eaters and staunch supporters. They already have access to the Ministry. I'm sure it's impossible to screen them."

"Hold on." James cut in, staring at Bella. "You're fifteen! You can't be in the order. You have school!"

Bella stared at him in disbelief. "What?"

Dumbledore sensed a train wreck in the making and quickly intervened. "James, Bella is a legitimate Order member in the other reality. Given her standing and who she is, I don't see why this shouldn't continue."

"She's a minor. As her parent, I don't agree. She should be in school. She's not alone here Dumbledore! She has us!"

"Sirius already gave the required consent James." Dumbledore said, gently. "Her decision has been ratified by her guardian."

"How could you? Are you out of your mind?" James fumed at Sirius.

Sirius scowled at him. "She's his number one target. And she's a bloody good fighter. One way or another, she's already embroiled in this war and it's safer for her to be a part of the order."

"I don't care what you think. I will not allow it."

That was the last straw for Bella and Dumbledore sighed as her face whitened and she stood up angrily.

"You have been my dad for the last half hour and suddenly you call the shots?" she demanded, her angry gaze trained on James. "Here's news for you: Nobody tells me what to do. Nobody! And if you think you can fucking waltz in one fine day and tell me what to or not do, you have something else coming."

She turned to Dumbledore. "What I really came up here was to tell you that I'm going to continue staying with Professor Snape. He's agreed to train me. We also intend to find permanent residence in Hogsmeade as neither of us intend to return to school once term starts."

Dumbledore nodded, unsurprised. He had seen this coming.

Sirius who had been looking at a very ashen James with concern, suddenly snapped his head towards her. "You're staying with Snivellus? And you aren't going back to school?"

He looked hard at Dumbledore who had a thoughtful expression on his face. "You're allowing this?" he demanded.

"I think it would be wise for Bella to stay out of public view. And Severus is a gifted wizard. She'll learn much from him. She needs to learn to fight much more than any of us will."

He turned to Bella. "The order convenes this evening at Godric's Hollow. I will expect you and Severus there. It is time for us to start compiling our forces. As you rightly pointed out, Voldemort will attack."

Bella nodded curtly and without pausing to look at her very silent father or a very obviously angry Sirius, she strode out of his office.

Sirius stared after her, frustrated and furious. "What is going on between Snape and her? They hate each other!"

"I think, that some understanding has been reached." Dumbledore said with a smile, still pleasantly surprised by their odd friendship.

He looked at James kindly. "I did warn you to take it easy with her James. Your girl's a firebrand, a lot like Lily."

James shrugged dispiritedly. Dumbledore sighed. "Don't worry James." he said softly. "She's upset about a lot of things and you just triggered her off. Mark my words, she'll be fine with you this evening. Just don't overwhelm her. Give her space."

James looked more hopeful. He turned to Sirius. "Is she always this..." then stopped, intrigued. Sirius was still staring at the door Bella had shut behind her, with an expression that was an odd mix of longing, despair and speculation.

James felt inexplicably intrusive, like he stumbled on something forbidden and deep, not meant for him. And for the first time, he wondered about the strange relationship his daughter and best friend seemed to share – explosive, wild, compulsive and something else James couldn't put his finger on.

Severus was annoyed. He had known that Bella would bail but that didn't make it any easier. He stood by the fire place in the large, cavernous living quarters in the Potter's residence, thankful that it was atleast empty when he floo'ed himself in. He could hear murmurs in the inner chambers and he slouched some more. 'Potter, you are a bloody coward. I'm going to make you pay for this when I get back.'

He figured he might as well get this over with and walked inside. The murmurs ceased and the silence thrummed away. Some of the order members from his reality smiled at him welcomingly while the others just gave him speculative or mistrustful looks. Or both.

"Welcome back, Severus." said Remus warmly, walking up to him and holding out his hand. Tonks waved cheerfully while Kingsley clapped his back. Severus knew he was a master at his poker face, so he could only surmise they had logically picked up on his unease. He nodded quietly at them, surprised by their camaraderie.

He looked around noticing a lot of the previously dead were still absent. It had seemed that the order was thinning out anyway. His eyes fell on James Potter, who was frowning at him. Severus spared him a disdainful look.

"Where's Bella?" demanded James.

"I'm holding her hostage in my pocket, Potter." said Severus coolly. "Should I ask her to peek up, wave and mark attendance?"

James narrowed his eyes at him, his hand reaching for his wand. "I see you've developed some sarcasm Snivellus... A big improvement from the vague remarks obscured by a runny nose."

Severus grit his teeth at the old nick name. "Get a grip Pothead. She decided she'd rather not lower her IQ by having to spend the evening in your exasperating presence. She has enough problems dealing with the inherent genetic disorders."

"I wasn't aware you thought so lowly of my intellect, Sev."

Severus' eyes fluttered close at the low, female voice coming from behind him. His entire world coalesced into a single moment as her voice floated into his ears. There were nights he had lain in bed, unable to sleep, wishing he had just one more chance to say he was sorry... And now, his wish granted, he felt the fates mocking him, laughing at him at the confirmation of the fact that he was a mere cowardly dreamer.

"Lily Evans." he said out loud.

"Lily Potter." James reminded him, triumphant and vindictive.

Severus ignored him and turned to face her. She was as lovely as he remembered her. Older and still more beautiful. Clearly she was one who could carry the passing years gracefully. She smiled shakily and stepped closer. "Good to have you back."

The words came out from his mouth uninhibited, propelled by his awe of having her in front of him again.

"It's good to be back... Lily."

Her smile grew brighter. She hugged him tightly and he breathed a sigh into her red hair. It was like coming back to a house, expecting it to be empty and instead finding it warm and inviting, with nothing but smiles and the smell of hot food wafting in.

It was like finding the hope that he had abandoned years and years ago.

She pulled back from his embrace and smiled at him. "You look the same."

"You look better."

She smiled wider at his compliment.

"Meeting's starting. Dumbledore's here." James' voice broke him out of his daze, sounding curt and faintly aggrieved. Severus supposed he was lucky that Potter had managed to keep his mouth shut for two whole minutes.

Suddenly he frowned, realizing this moment had been easy. Too easy.

"Where's Black?" he demanded, looking around for his insufferable nemesis.

"None of your..." began James but Remus hurried over-riding him.

"He went to Hogmeade on some work. Dumbledore knows." Remus gave Severus a meaningful look and Severus groaned. 'Hogmeade...Hogwarts. He knew she wouldn't come!'

He noticed that most of the order didn't seem to find anything unusual in this, but he noted with some interest that Arthur Weasley looked distinctly uncomfortable. Severus tried not to smile. If Molly Weasley ever found out, Black would be dead meat.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Bella, irritated and alarmed. "Don't you have a meeting to be at?"

"So do you. You'd think after all the campaigning and convincing I had to do for you, you'd atleast show up and prove your mettle. Now James will never let me hear the end of it." Sirius retorted.

Both of them were standing on the Forbidden Forest perimeter. She had wandered off after Snape left and run into Sirius, who had been tracking her down.

"I don't give a hoot what he thinks..."

"He's your father. And Lily is hurt that you made peace with him but you haven't come home and done the same with her."

Bella groaned and rubbed her eyes. "It isn't like that... I just wanted a time out ... Oh man..."

She finally met his gaze, albeit tiredly. "Why are you here?"

"Me? I'm on a mission. I got to bunk the meeting in the interest of finding out why my girlfriend is giving me the cold shoulder and hiding behind evil, snivelly bats."

"Stop calling him that. Professor Snape is my... ally."

"So I've noticed. I don't like it."

"That's your problem, not mine. He's helping me."

"James and I are AURORS. Your mum is a Healer and Remus is the best spell caster and breaker. And you think Professor Greasy Hair can help you the best? I think you're just running away."

"From what? You?"

"Yes. Me. Your dad. Your Mum. Remus. All of us."

"That's bullshit."

Sirius stepped up closer, their bodies almost touching. "Then why are you avoiding me?" he whispered, reaching out to brush a lock of her hair from her eyes.

She turned away. "Why are you pretending you still want me?" she whispered in reply.

Sirius looked confused. He forced her chin up and compelled her to look at him. "What are you talking about?"

"You have a life now. You're not... not some disturbed Azkaban escapee! You have girlfriends, fuck buddies... whatever the hell they are. You have family! You have my Dad, Mum and Remus. So why

do you care? Why would you want someone as messed up as me now?"

Bella cursed the tears that were filling up in her eyes. She hated that she could survive Bellatrix Lestrange, Voldemort and even years of abuse from the Dursleys dry-eyed but her tear ducts went haywire around Sirius. It was him she wanted to prove her strength to, more than anybody else. And it was Sirius that broke her when years of murdering wizards and psychotic relatives couldn't.

Sirius suddenly looked dangerous. "Is that what you've been thinking? How could you?" he hissed, his grip on her tightening to the point of being painful.

Bella looked him squarely and said, "What would you think, if you were me?"

He stepped closer, his arms snaking tight around her, almost crushing her. "If I were you, I'd shut the hell up and kiss me."

Their lips met. Sirius forced them apart and drank in her taste hungrily. She wilted in his arms, unable to match his intensity. His hands weaved into her hair, his lips still bruising hers.

They tumbled to the ground, still kissing fiercely.

"I've missed this. I've missed you." Bella whispered, her hands trailing down the front of his robes, unfastening them.

"I can't even sleep without you by my side." admitted Sirius gruffly, pulling her sweater off her body.

All their clothes soon followed suit, thrown carelessly on the ground beside them. Sirius pulled her back against his chest, her back grazing his nipples. His hands groped her breasts, making her moan with want. Her knees on either side of Sirius' legs, she leaned back and caught his lips, leaving his hands to wander over her breasts and navel.

He entered her like that, muffling her cry by keeping his tongue entwined with hers. They moved together, seeking relief.

"Promise me..." whispered Bella, her arms going behind her and slipping into his shaggy black hair. "Promise me that if anything happens... If you ever change your mind... Promise me you'll do what makes you happy."

Sirius moved faster. "You make me happy. You make me whole. And never ever ask me something like this again."

He kissed the side of her arched neck, thrusting faster. "I love you." he whispered, punctuating each word by pushing into her.

Bella shuddered and let out a rough cry, coming along with Sirius. He held her limp form, pushing her hair to the side and softly dropping kisses down the back of her neck. The trees around them whistled softly as the wind blew over the two lovers crumpled down on the damp mud.

"It's getting cold..." he said softly, turning her around so that she faced him. She burrowed herself further into his arms, drawing warmth from him. "I think I've seen worse." she told him, as she kissed his shoulder. Both of them grew silent, thinking of Azkaban.

"Bellatrix. Did she..." asked Sirius, hugging her tighter. "Did we come just in time?"

She remained silent. Sirius clenched his teeth. "For how long... The Cruciatus... I'll kill her... I swear on everything..."

"I owe her for that." Bella spoke up softly. Sirius pulled back and stared at her. Bella looked at him emptily. "The pain was unbearable... But it made me feel again. I was alive because of it. I was worse off when she just found me."

Sirius pursed his lips. "Should I wait till you sing a song in her praise before I kill her?"

Bella wrapped her arms and legs around him, pulling herself closer. Sirius felt his loins stirring as desire rushed through his nerves once more. Her skin brushed against his, never breaking contact.

"Is it wrong that I'd rather feel insatiable hate rather than the emptiness? I'm no hero. I don't want to be. Can we run away?" she asked him.

Sirius smiled sadly. He knew exactly how she felt. "He'll always find us. And Bella... This may seem like the wrong time to bring it up, but James and Lily will be destroyed if you leave them again."

She looked into his eyes and was disturbed to see that his eyes were blue. Dark, deep blue. His expression was earnest. This wasn't her Sirius talking. This was the godfather from the new reality. As if to confirm her vague conclusion, he suddenly looked down at their tangled, naked limbs with an odd, troubled expression. His eyes betrayed something else – uncertainty and angst, like someone caught in the middle of a revolutionary battle, armed and completely unconvinced of the cause that was driving him to fight.

Bella felt cold. She pushed herself off him and reached for her long black cloak. She wanted to be covered and out of here.

"Bella?" His voice was deeper again and on looking up, his eyes had turned steel blue-grey. Her Sirius.

She angrily brushed the tears away. The reversal bought her no relief, just helpless anger. She was sick of everything. She longed to be with Ron and Hermione. She it to be just the three of them, laughing about Malfoy's slimy-ness and being fifteen, the way it would have been before her life spun even more out of control that it usually did.

"Where are you going? Snape won't be back for a while and we still have time." said Sirius, looking bewildered by her abrupt change in mood.

"Ron and Hermione. I want to see my friends."

Sirius' expression cleared and he looked relieved. "Ah. They're both at the Burrow. Mr. and Mrs Granger are both in Australia. Hermione's idea. Long story."

"I want to go see them."

Sirius smiled. "Sure thing. I'll take you."

Bella felt her irritation surge. "I'll go by myself..."

A ball of flame erupted beside them, shocking them both. They whipped out their wands and pointed them at it. Fawkes let out a soft, quivering cry and dropped a small piece of parchment in front of Bella. She swooped down and picked it up, heart hammering. Sirius read over her shoulder, a hiss of horror escaping his throat. Written in Dumbledore's loopy handwriting,

Diagon Alley has been attacked. The Order is going to fight. We could use the help.

"Where's the goddamned cavalry?" groaned Remus as he dodged a Cruciatus from Mulciber. Kingsley was the only one close enough to hear him over all the screaming.

"James managed to get some of his boys from Law Enforcement. Scrimgeour's rallying and sending in whichever ministry official is at the office right now!"

He stunned Avery and turned his attention to Alecto Carrow.

It was utter and complete mayhem. All the civilian wizards were trying their best to stay inside the shops, but most of them were caught in the cross fire. This attack was devoid of the usual Voldemort trademarks. This wasn't on the sly, nor was it target specific. None of the Death Eaters were masked. The open act of terrorism terrified everybody, including the order. Voldemort was taking the war out to the public battleground – a sure sign of his confidence in winning.

James and a young wizard he didn't recognise stood back to back, throwing Stunners at the congregation of Death Eaters tearing apart The Leaky Cauldron. James was focussing hard on two of the Death Eaters on the left and was nearly hit by the killing curse from Rabastan Lestrage. The unknown boy dived, dragging him down, thus saving him.

"Thanks kid! You should be an Auror! You have better reflexes than half my men!" yelled James gratefully, hurling a Body Binding curse at Rabastan.

"I am one sir!" the boy called over his shoulder. "Ainsley McKnowl's the name. I reported to Auror Black in the other reality." James shot him a grin as he managed to catch Rodolphus with a stunner. "Welcome aboard McKnowl. Now you report to me as well."

Ainsley dodged a curse from Bellatrix Lestrage. "Sure thing, Auror Potter! And I'm taking her down!" He tried to disarm Bellatrix.

James grabbed his arm and spun him around and took his place, and putting Ainsley against his back to face Crabbe. "Sorry McKnowl. But this bitch is mine. Get my back and immobilize Crabbe and Nott."

Bellatrix laughed raucously at James' declaration. "Still touchy about my meeting with your daughter, Potter?"

"Impedimenta!" James cried.

"Crucio!" shouted Bellatrix, snarling as James dropped and rolled, completely avoiding the curse.

"Lupin!" crowed Greyback cheerfully. "Looking good, fellow wolf!"

Remus faced him off, a soft growl emanating from the pits of his stomach. "And you still look like a depraved lunatic!"

Fenrir smirked and leapt at him, only to collide with an invisible shield. He let out a wild roar and turned to his side, where Tonks stood with her wand held out. "Tough luck, Fenrir. And I thought kids constituted your usual menu?"

He laughed at her. "Oh yes! But I have a soft spot for Remus Lupin, girly! My favourite little cub, so righteous and in denial of his true nature."

Tonks' eyes narrowed to slits. "Don't. You. Dare. Imply. He's. Anything. Like. YOU!" she hurtled a curse at him after every word, and missing every time as the werewolf nimbly dodged her.

"Dora! Behind you!" shouted Remus, rushing past her and impeding Amycus Carrow who was sneaking up behind her.

Lily, Minerva and Sturgis dodged the curses flying overhead. They were trying to get the civilians to safety while the order kept the fighting going and sufficiently distracted the Death Eaters from their real targets. Sturgis grabbed hold of a young mother, holding a toddler, barely three years. He thrust an old quill into her hand.

"Portkey!" he hurriedly explained. "It'll get you out of here. You can't apparate with the child."

The terrified mother nodded and ran to take shelter behind some rubble till the portkey activated.

The entire street was resounding with loud crack-like noises as the wizards and witches came to their senses and apparated out of there.

The Death Eaters seemed to notice that their initial targets were getting away. Lucius Malfoy pointed his wand up in the air and the sky overhead burst into ominous, twinkling stars that banded together to form the Dark Mark. Lily and Arthur exchanged alarmed looks. The Dark Mark was never shot up in the air unless the Death eaters had clearly won. But the battle was still going on...

A mist swirled around them, the air around them dropping a clear ten degrees.

"Dementors..." Emmeline whispered.

And sure enough, swooping in from all directions, the hooded creatures converged around them, by the Death Eaters. Fenrir Greyback laughed gleefully. On either side of him stood Goyle and MacNair, smirking and looking equally wolfish.

"The Dark Mark was their signal." hissed Frank, looking around at the civilians cowering behind the rubble or hiding inside the buildings. "This is bad..."

Rodolphus Lestrangle broke the uneasy pause by stepping forward and aiming his wand at Lily, who was order member closest to him.

"No!" yelled James and Severus, both leaping forward. The silence shattered and everybody broke out of their standstill and attacked the nearest enemy. Rodolphus's word's were lost in the commotion, but his lips moved to form the word "Avada". Malfoy and Bellatrix leapt in James and Severus' way, blocking them. Lily watched in stunned horror, her wand still pointing at a large chunk of concrete that was being levitated by her to prevent it from crushing the two children underneath it, unable to force her wand away and point it at Rodolphus or even move.

But before he could utter the rest of the curse, a jet of red light hit him from behind and he toppled over. Bella stood there looking down at him, her wand outstretched.

"Bella!" cried Lily. "What are you doing here! Leave!"

Bella rolled her eyes at her and marched up to her. She pointed at the concrete rubble Lily was holding up and muttered "Confringo!" The slab shattered into miniscule, harmless particles and the two kids underneath were dragged inside a nearby building by Hestia.

All around them streams of multi-coloured lights flew from various wand-tips. Sirius had joined the foray and was circling the Carrow siblings with Severus.

James rushed to their side, glancing over his wife. "Too close." he said, tersely. He turned to Bella but she was already locked in a fierce showdown with Greyback.

"Oh so this is the Girl-Who-Lived!" exclaimed Fenrir as he easily blocked her Stunner.

"And you're the disgusting idiot who chews on little kids! A pleasure... Not!" she replied. She pointed her wand at his heart and said "Diffindo!"

Fenrir roared in pain as her curse slashed across his chest. Dropping his wand, he ran headlong at her.

"Bella!" yelled James in horror as he rushed ahead, his wand held out. Lily already had hers whipped out and pointed at Fenrir but Bellatrix proved to be an obstacle as she leapt in front screaming "Immobulus!" Lily was frozen, watching in horror as Bellatrix turned to James and Bella.

"Impedimenta!" shouted James, stopping Fenrir on his path. Bellatrix shrieked something incomprehensible and she pointed her wand at James. But Bella beat her to it. "Expelliarmus!"

Bellatrix's wand went soaring overhead. Bella marched up to her and sent her fist straight into her gut. Bellatrix doubled over, shrieking in pain.

"Have to admit, that was far more satisfying than I expected." Bella declared.

Various patronuses bounded, floated and soared in the alley, repelling the Dementors.

"Let's get rid of the Death Eaters first." Bella called to Sirius. "The floating horrors will follow suit!"

The battle that followed was vicious and violent. Looking back, the order would just be grateful that they sufficiently managed to distract the Death eaters while the civilians made their escape with the help of the Ministry officials in the scene, aided by the Order members who were in the second line of defence.

"Ow..." muttered Bella wincing as Lily swabbed the deep cut in her arm with something that stung harshly. Bella was relieved to see that the pain was immediately followed by effective action. The skin closed around the wound.

It was almost midnight. The Order had finally routed the Death eaters and the Dementors, but at a terrible price. The body count in the alley was quite high, most of them innocent shoppers who were attacked before the order and the ministry came to their defence.

The order too was badly hit. Hestia was in Mungo's, still unconscious. Bill Weasley and Tonks were both sporting severe slashes across their limbs. They were healing but the blood loss had rendered them weak and barely alive. Severus was feverishly stirring up Blood Replenishing Potion, even as the blood flow rate from their wounds slowed slowly.

Sturgis hadn't survived, hit by a killing curse thrown by Malfoy.

'They made pulp out of us.' thought Bella, the thought lowering her spirits further. The price had been too heavy, with very few Galleons thrown their way.

They had managed to capture Rabastan Lestrangle and Amycus Carrow, both currently held in a highly secured location, known only to the Aurors. Nott had been killed by Alecko Carrow's curse which had narrowly missed Severus. Crabbe and Goyle were missing several limbs. Bellatrix had been severely attacked by James and Lily and Bella knew she would be out of commission for a while. Malfoy's untimely intervention had prevented them from taking her prisoner too. 'Next time...' Bella promised herself. 'Forget prisoner, I'll kill that bitch.'

Bella had been locked in a ferocious fight with Greyback, finally culminating with both their wands being thrown aside and a fierce physical fight ensuing. Luckily Remus and Sirius intervened before Fenrir could claw her too much. But Bella had a feeling that the deep scar that ran down her back wasn't going to disappear easily.

Lily looked at her apologetically. "It'll sting a bit but..."

"It's okay." Bella assured her. "I'm no stranger to painful remedies. I've taken Skelegrow. That one takes the cake."

Lily winced. "Your previous fights ended up with you minus bones?"

Bella burst out laughing. "I wish it were Death Eaters that did that! That would've been less embarrassing. It happened because an idiot of a DADA teacher tried fixing my broken hand after a Quidditch match and ended up de-boning me instead."

Lily chuckled weakly. "I'm guessing that was Lockhart. I knew him in school. He was three years above us, a Hufflepuff."

"Is he still around here?"

"Yes. But he couldn't manage the celebrity status here. Voldemort's constant presence here has made a lot of things different from your reality."

Bella nodded, her smile fading. "I can see that. Tough life huh?"

Lily shrugged. "Better than yours, I'd wager."

An awkward silence filled in between them and Lily wished she hadn't brought it up. Bella finally managed a slight smile. "Oh well... There are upsides. I learnt street-fighting. Bloody useful. Wizards, especially purebloods like the Death Eaters, always underestimate the potency of a good punch or a well aimed kick. Works to my advantage. I'm pretty average with magic, so anything else is a boon."

Lily frowned slightly. "You fought very well today. A lot of practice?"

Bella grinned slightly. "Nope. This is only my second official fight with them. Instinct, I suppose. DADA is the only subject I fare well in.

In fact, I topped that. I'm afraid I don't take after you or dad in the grades department. I hear both of you were prodigies, as were Sirius and Remus."

Lily smiled sadly at her. "I'm sure you'd have done just as well if you had a normal life."

Bella smiled back, equally melancholy. "That's a nice thought. We'll never know."

Lily looked at her in surprise. "Yes we will! This semester you'll do great!"

Bella sensed trouble in the offing. "Not quite. I'm not going back. I'm training with Professor Snape. School seems trivial in the face of what's happening."

Lily looked at her mildly. "Really? We'll see."

Bella felt oddly wary. The dismissal from Lily came with a great deal of conviction. Bella had a feeling that Lily wouldn't be as easy to bulldoze as James.

Bella looked around curiously at the warm kitchen. It was large, spacious and gleamed with copper and steel pans. The shelves were lined with various jars. It felt homely.

Lily was watching Bella nervously. "So... This is home. What do you think?"

Bella looked lost. "It's lovely." she said softly, a lump forming in her throat. This is where she'd have grown up if Voldemort never existed. Her mother wouldn't be sitting in front of her, looking unsure. She'd be laughing and cajoling her daughter to eat another bite and reminding her that it was her turn to do the dishes and wonder out loud where her father was...

Bella closed her eyes wearily. It was painful. It was a dream and yet it could be real. Bella was at crossroads. She didn't honestly know how to deal with all of this. She could never be a normal teenager. She could never be that innocent child. She was sure James and Lily would recoil in horror if they really saw how far gone she was.

'I can't pretend to be something I'm not.' she told herself fiercely. She opened her eyes and met Lily's eyes. There was so much hope in them.

"Are you... hungry?" she asked uncertainly. Bella nodded and jumped up, ignoring the piercing pain in her back. She had decided not to tell Lily about it. "Yeah. Starved. I can cook, so not a problem..." she trailed off as she noticed Lily's face fall.

Bella stared at her mother, the woman who had sacrificed her life to keep her safe and she felt ashamed.

And Bella decided that she would do this. She would at least try to be normal.

'I was robbed of my life. They were taken away from theirs as well. This is their dream as much as it's mine... And like Snape said, third chances are not easily wrested from fate.'

She smiled widely at Lily. "On the other hand, I can only cook muggle style. That's going to take so much time and I'm really, really hungry."

She looked at Lily expectantly. She was surprised by a warm, loving hug. Bella awkwardly patted her on the back. But Lily didn't let go and after a few moments, Bella realized her mother was crying.

"Mum?" whispered Bella frantically, replaying the last few minutes in her head, trying to figure out what she had said that brought on the waterworks.

Lily drew back a bit, her arms still around Bella. She was sniffing, tears still running down her cheeks.

"Mum..." repeated Bella nervously. "I didn't mean to... I mean... Not that hungry... It's okay if you..."

"No!" sobbed Lily. "Don't say that! It's just that... I don't know what to cook!"

"Huh? You're crying because you can't decide what to cook?"

"What kind of mother am I? I don't even know what you like! I can't even guess! Isn't this supposed to be instinct? Shouldn't I just know?" With that, a fresh round of crying ensued.

It was all Bella could do to hold her laughter in, deciding that this would not be the moment to tell her mother that thanks to the general starvation at the Dursleys, her food deprivation stretched to a point where she would eat anything as long as it stood still long enough to be speared by her fork.

James, Sirius and Remus staggered in tiredly an hour later to find Bella and Lily cheerfully talking over a bowl of stew.

James plopped down next to Bella and put his arm around her. "Good one kid. Dumbledore was right... You fight well. But we're going to have a long discussion about your methods."

"Right. Sure. Thanks. Where do we stand?"

"Thirty dead, including Sturgis. Diagon Alley is damaged beyond repair. Florish and Botts is the only store that looks remotely distinguishable." Remus told her grimly.

"How're Tonks and Bill holding up?"

A shadow crossed his face. "Alive. They should recover. Severus is watching over them at the Hospital Wing at Hogwarts."

Bella nodded, mildly curious about Remus' change in expression.

Sirius had sat himself next to Lily, right across the table from Bella. He was frowning at her. "Did Greyback get you?"

"No." she lied calmly.

Remus slammed his goblet down. "What were you thinking, Bella? That was insane!"

"He wasn't in his wolf form. It was a bit of a tussle, that's all."

"He's thrice your size! And physical injuries from a werewolf are life-long damage, whether or not it's full moon or it came from his claws and not his fangs!"

Bella tried not thinking about her mangled back. James tightened his arm around her, his lips white.

"What did I miss?" he asked quietly, looking at Sirius intently.

"Bella and Greyback decided to forgo the wands and have a sparring session."

"I see." His voice was flat.

Bella tried not to sigh out loud. She decided her time at Godric's Hollow was up. She pushed her empty bowl away and made to stand up. James' arm held her down.

"What?" she protested. "I have to get back to Hogwarts!"

"Snape is busy tonight." James replied. "You might as well crash here."

"My stuff is at Hogwarts."

"No worries. I took the liberty of getting you some stuff." Sirius told her coolly.

Bella sneered at him. "How kind of you."

Sirius had gotten up to drop his wine goblet on the counter, tugged her long hair. "Lose the attitude, Potter."

Bella stuck her tongue out at him and Sirius laughed and scooped her in his arms, taking her seat and holding her in his lap. Remus grimaced at him while Bella prayed that the gesture looked innocent enough to pass off as normal between a godfather and his charge.

James and Lily looked at one another, thoroughly perplexed.

"Is everything between you two always bipolar? Talk about mood extremities..." said James, shaking his head in amusement.

"You don't know even half of it." muttered Remus into his goblet.

Bella tossed and turned, knowing sleep was far away. She had gotten used to Snape's Sleeping Potion and had a feeling she would never be able to sleep on her own again.

She sat up and looked around at the room. It was big. 'Like everything else in this house.' Bella had guessed, judging by the money in the Potter vault, her family had been one of the wealthy, pureblood ones. With James as an Auror and Lily a Healer, she figured the cash inflow had to be high, keeping with the Potter tradition. Bella felt oddly disconnected. Money was always out of her reach and it was something she had learnt to live without. Unlike Ron, not being able to have something didn't bother her in the least. She supposed her miserable childhood gave her perspective and opened her eyes to what real misfortune was. Even with the entire Potter vault at her disposal, she had been frugal with it, hardly denting the savings. Bella realised that now any slightest form of extravagance irritated her. Looking around at the intricately carved mahogany bed and the gold lined wall paper of the room that was now hers, she felt a deep pang of longing for the Spartan room she had at Sirius and Remus' apartment.

Thinking of the apartment reminded her of Sirius. She wondered where he was. He had casually mentioned that his room was in the same corridor as hers. Bella hadn't dared to sneak out and find him. She knew that if James even had the slightest suspicion, Sirius would be a goner. For the first time, she was terribly apprehensive and nervous about their relationship. She remembered that Mr. Weasley knew about them and hoped he had forgotten about it in all the confusion.

'I'm never going to sleep...' Bella thought in resignation when the door slowly creaked open. Bella sat up and immediately reached for her wand. Sirius slowly snuck inside, shutting the door behind him.

Bella let out the breath she had been holding.

"You! Get OUT!" she hissed. "Are you mental?"

Sirius threw himself on his bed rather happily. "Couldn't sleep."

"Neither could I but you don't see me sneaking into your room! My parents are two rooms away!"

Sirius rolled his eyes at her. "Calm down. I'm not going to do anything. I just needed to be near you."

Bella muttered a few unsavoury things under her breath but in all honesty, she was grateful. She knew exactly how he felt.

She fell back on the bed next to him, resting her head on his arm.

"So... Did you and Lily..."

"Yeah. It was... nice." She could feel him smiling against her hair.

"So you'll be staying here with us?"

Bella stiffened. She had been dreading the question. "I was thinking..." she ventured carefully. "Maybe alternate days..."

Sirius' body went rigid. "Hmmm." His tone was casual but Bella wasn't fooled.

"You both sleep in separate rooms right?" he asked abruptly.

Bella was startled at the question. Up till now, she had never given the fact that Snape and she shared a room a single thought. Now with Sirius asking her, in that tone, made her feel suddenly tense.

"He sleeps on the couch. He did manage to get in another bed this morning though."

Sirius held her tighter. "You share a room with him?"

Bella forced herself to stay calm. "I appeared on short notice. He has only one room. And I'll have you know that he's been a complete gentleman."

"You will not spend the nights there. Train during the day. You will return here at night. This is your home."

Bella felt her control on her temper slip rapidly. "I decide where my home is. And you will accept that decision. This is not open for negotiation!"

Sirius sat up and glared at her. "Why must you always be like this? You either push me away and let me wallow in despair without letting me in or you wrap your fucking poisonous tentacles of bullshit defiance around me and kill me!"

Bella was stung. "Tentacles? What am I? Ursula the sea-witch?"

"What?"

"The Little Mermaid... Oh never mind! The point is I'm not trying to do any such thing! I just want... out. I just need someplace else to live alright?"

"This is your home! Why are you doing this? To James and Lily. To me?"

"Hogwarts is my only real home."

"I really hate you sometimes."

Bella swallowed hard. "Then go. Leave me alone."

Sirius pulled his arm away from under her and got up. Bella turned away from him and hugged her pillow tightly, blinking back tears.

She heard Sirius sigh behind her. His hand closed around her wrists, his thumb gently rubbing circles at the base of her palm. She pulled her hand away from him.

"Bella..." he began, placating. "I'm sorry. You know I didn't mean that."

"Just go away. I don't want to see you." Her voice came out muffled. Bella knew any chances of sleep were completely washed away.

Sirius slid into her bed behind her and held her. Bella tried to shrug him off.

"Bella. Stop. I don't want to leave you alone. And more selfishly, I don't want to go. Please..."

Bella hesitated for a minute, then turned to face him. "I don't want you here. But I want Padfoot to be here."

Sirius looked confused by her request before understanding.

"Oh." He smiled.

Sirius transformed and the large dog curled up beside her. Bella wrapped her arms around the warm animal, comforted by the canine, the uncomplicated version of Sirius.

Dog and girl, they both drifted to sleep like that.

Bella slowly meandered through the vast grounds that surrounded the Potter Manor. Bella still found it odd to call the house a Manor. It was something she could imagine Draco Malfoy saying to describe his house.

'Bloody purebloods and their stupid Manors... A house just isn't good enough for you is it... Imperialists... Pompous pigs...'

"Hey! I resent that!"

Bella started. James was leaning against the trunk of a massive oak, looking amused.

"Did I say that out loud?" Bella asked, bemused.

"Yep. And might I add - How rude!"

Bella shrugged and grinned. "Sorry ... but..."

"Yeah I know. Moony told me about your dislike of extravagance." James came to stand next to her. "Pity... I always liked big houses."

"So does Sirius." Bella said absently.

James laughed. "Surprisingly. You'd think the way he ran from Grimmauld Place, he'd never be one for ceremonies and glamour."

"Anybody would run away from Grimmauld Place. I've seen haunted crematoriums that look more cheerful."

James looked at her in surprise. "You've been there?"

"Sirius and I have been living there the last couple of weeks. It was the order HQ."

James looked astounded. "How the hell did Sirius do that? Impossible."

Bella frowned. "He's the last surviving Black. So the place directly went to him."

A look of comprehension dawned on his face. "Oh! Walburga Black died in that reality eh? Good for Sirius!"

Bella looked stunned. "She's alive here? Blimey! The crazy old hag!"

James gave her a slightly disapproving look. "She's Sirius' mum Bella... And you don't even know her."

"Her portrait tells me plenty. And I can call her whatever I want. Her portrait called me 'Filth born of a Mudblood and a Blood Traitor'."

James started laughing. "Sirius must've had a whale of a time smashing the portrait to bits!"

"He wishes. Permanent Sticking Charm at the back of it. It's right at the entrance. The entire Order is well acquainted with Walburga Black. Needless to say, Sirius has gained everybody's deepest sympathies. The last time I checked, Tonks was still thanking all the powers in the universe that her mum broke out of that mad family."

James grinned. "She has no idea. Druella Black could've given her sister a run for her money."

Both of them fell silent. Bella absently crossed her arms across her chest, trying to generate warmth. James frowned at her light t-shirt.

"Do you have something against warm clothes?"

"I didn't expect it to be this cold. It's summer!"

James summoned a jacket from inside the house and handed it to her. She gratefully tugged it on.

"We haven't seen summer in years Bella. Not since the Dementors switched loyalties to Voldemort. We spend half our time trying to curb their population."

"The muggles haven't realised that the weather has gone a bit off?"

"They're floating an Ice Age theory."

Bella laughed. "Bizarre. In the other reality, the environmentalists were proposing a Global Warming theory. Though I think it'd have been another ten years before anybody started taking it seriously."

James pursed his lips then he started cautiously.

"Lily is kind of determined you go to school."

"Is she now?"

"I agree with her."

"Hmmm."

"You don't have to fight. You shouldn't throw away your childhood like this. It comes around only once in a lifetime."

"I threw it away a long time ago. And you can't expect me to sit quietly in school when Voldemort's razing the country down."

James expression tightened. "Why Snape?" he demanded.

Bella frowned at him slightly. "I know you don't like him, but that doesn't mean I have to share your opinions."

"Sirius says both of you absolutely despise each other." challenged James.

"We did. Things... changed. He understands."

"What does he understand?" James asked exasperatedly. Moony had said the exact same thing and when James had probed further, he had shook his head and said it wasn't in his place to talk about it.

Bella hesitated. "It's complicated. Some other time, maybe."

Then she gave him a winning smile. "I think I smell waffles. Mum and Moony must be wondering where we got off to. Shall we?"

She looped her arm around James' and dragged him off. Cheerful though he was, about Bella's obvious comfort around him, he still couldn't help feeling resentful that Moony and Snape seemed to understand her when he couldn't.

Bella had initially wanted to go to the Burrow for the day but it had turned out that Mr Weasley had sealed the Burrow fireplace from the Floo network temporarily as a safety precaution. She was missing Ron and Hermione so much that she had a feeling she would go mad without them. She also wanted to talk to the only two people who would set some semblance of normality in her life.

'I want Quidditch. I want to tell Ron that the Chudley Cannons suck even in this reality and have him rant about it for an hour. I want to ask Hermione something incredibly stupid and look at her horrified-disgusted expression. I want to see Mrs Weasley and eat her delicious chocolate pudding. Actually, I just want to eat anything she cooks.'

Bella instantly felt guilty at the last thought. Lily had really overdone breakfast, going out of her way to ensure Bella ate everything.

Lily had left for her shift at Mungo's, apologising and promising Bella she would return as soon as she was done. Bella had waved her off feeling extremely warm at the how eager her mum had been to come back home to be with her daughter. Sirius and James had left for work rather reluctantly too. There was no way they couldn't go, especially after what had happened the previous evening.

Bella sat on the large armchair examining the clothes she had on. They were muggle (something that James found funny) and far from the simple, almost rag-like clothes she preferred; they were rather pretty and intricate, clinging to her body in a way that made her feel self conscious.

Remus strolled into the room and took the seat adjacent to her.

"You look nice." he told her. "Sirius seems to have taken the opportunity to get you whatever he wants to see you in."

Bella smiled slightly. "Yeah I can see that." She looked at him nervously.

Remus took note of her expression and rolled his eyes. "Relax Bella. I'm not going to start screaming."

Bella was relieved. "Oh. Good."

"That doesn't necessarily mean I approve." added Remus.

"I know. I don't think anybody will. Just don't tell..."

"James and Lily? I won't."

"Don't tell anybody!"

Remus suddenly looked shifty. "I might've ranted a bit to Dora..."

Bella let out a breath. "Tonks is cool. She won't say anything about it."

Remus laughed. "You're right about that. She's the one who told me to ease up."

"Walburga Black is alive here..." Bella told him slowly, looking uncomfortable.

Remus looked at her shrewdly. "You're not worried about what she will think, are you? She gave up on Sirius a long time ago."

"What? No! I was just thinking... Kreacher will know that the place was used for order HQ. You don't think he might repeat any of our information to Walburga, do you? Sirius is not his sole master anymore."

Remus looked thoughtful. "You know, I've been thinking about that. I don't think it'll be a danger even if she knows. She won't be pleased but she won't tell the Death Eaters."

"You seem confident."

Remus leaned forward and spoke softly.

"Bella, Walburga hasn't gone over the cliff in this reality. She hasn't stopped grieving Regulus' Death, or Orion's. But she isn't crazy. I know that this may sound incredible to you, but I have a feeling that Sirius being out there, alive and well, is keeping her going. In the other reality, she finally drifted to madness only when Sirius was thrown into Azkaban."

Bella looked incredulous. "She hates him, Moony!"

"Hated, perhaps. But I'm not so sure anymore, Bella. In an ironic twist of fate, he's all she has left. She has completely disassociated herself from the Death eaters, including any of her family in that camp. She will never forgive them for killing Regulus. She hasn't spoken to Narcissa or Bellatrix in years and it's an open secret that she wants to have nothing to do with them. Whether or not she really cares for Sirius as a son, he's the last heir to the Black name. She will not do anything to jeopardise him."

"Bloody hell... These purebloods are crazy. I'm glad my dad's not related to them."

Remus' lips twitched. "All pureblood families are related Bella."

"My grandparents are distantly related to the Blacks? Second or third cousins, like the Weasleys?"

Remus's smile grew into a full blown grin. "Your grandmother is Dorea Black. She's Walburga's aunt."

Bella felt her face drain of blood. "You're joking..."

Remus chuckled. "She'll still be on the Black family tapestry. Charlus Potter, your grandfather, was a sympathizer of muggles but the fact that he was pureblood spared your grandmother from being ousted from the family."

Bella leaned forward curiously. "She didn't share her family's views?"

Remus looked thoughtful. "Not particularly. She remained neutral. Like Mr Potter, she sympathised with muggles. But she did carry some of her family's blood pride. I know for a fact that she was

unhappy when James started dating Lily. It was Mr Potter who supported them and integrated Lily into the family, even before they got married. Charlus and Dorea both died six months before the wedding."

"How? What happened? They couldn't have been that old!"

Remus looked grim. "Nobody knows. Charlus was murdered and Dorea died a few days later, heartbroken. James tried to find the perpetrators for years after that. But Voldemort was rising and there were so many questionable deaths. It was impossible to track down."

"Could Voldemort have killed my grandfather?"

"We don't know. We probably never will. Incidentally, your room used to be Mrs Potter's. You know, you actually look a lot like her. Even James thinks you do."

"My grandmother was a Black. Cripes... I'm related to Bellatrix and the Malfoys!"

"And Sirius." added Remus smirking.

"Don't remind me."

A/N:

I'm so so so sorry for not updating for a month (I cannot believe it's been a MONTH!). This is so unlike me! But between FIFA, way too much spare time that induces indolence and impromptu vacations and roadtrips, I've completely gotten off FF.

My wonderful reviewers, I will reply to your reviews through PM in a bit. Thank you for that. It was a delight to find your messages in my inbox and that's what really made me sit and write the chapter right away.

I will resume my regular updating schedule again and hopefully the story will continue to appeal to you.

Cheers :)

There were times when Bella wished the ground beneath her would turn to quicksand and drag her in, out of sight. This was one of those moments.

"Please, for the love of everything in this universe, don't judge." she told Ron and Hermione wearily, as the two continued to stare at her in mingled horror and disbelief.

"B-But.." sputtered Ron, finally finding his voice. "He's your godfather! He's like your Dad equal-..."

"I know." Bella snapped, cutting him off.

"Are you insane?" he demanded. "And I thought it couldn't possibly get worse than Zabini."

"What's wrong with Blaise?" said Bella defensively. "He's funny, smart, good looking..."

"You forgot an insufferable, pureblood, Slytherin git."

"You know, sometimes I think you're a little extreme on this pureblood hatred. You're like an antidote for the Death Eaters but equally poisonous. Not healthy Ron. You might become a messed up Dark Lord slaughtering innocent non-Muggeborn wizards and witches."

"Don't change the topic Bella. You have to break it off."

"I love him."

Ron groaned and clamped his hands over his ears and kneeled over till his forehead touched the ground. "Why," he asked in despair. "must you always do something so outlandish and idiotic and get yourself in a colossal mess? Why can't you ever be a little normal?"

"I can't help who I fall in love with, alright? I can't control how I feel!"

"Yes you can! Just think about how it'll be twenty years from now. Sirius will be old! Grandfather old! You'll be young, energetic and faced with your entire life ahead of you. Your kids will call him Grandpa!"

"I don't care."

"He won't be able to satisfy you."

"Can you please stop being disgusting? I can't believe you're coming down to sexual prowess issues."

"Bella, he will be gone far before you're even old."

"He's not that old Ron. He's in his mid-thirties."

"You deserve better. You should be with someone young, carefree and who can assure you a life by his side. You don't need any more grief and complications in your life, Bella. You've paid your fair share." said Hermione softly, finally breaking her silence.

Bella swallowed the lump in her throat. "He's all that matters."

Ron and Hermione exchanged looks.

"And what if you're wrong?" asked Hermione gently.

"That's a problem for another day."

Ron opened his mouth to argue but Hermione headed him off with a warning glance.

"Well, we'll always stand by you whatever you do, Bella. But I can't say I'm happy about this or that I really approve. And frankly, I'm disappointed with Sirius. But if this makes you happy, we'll support both of you."

Bella gave her a grateful smile. "That's all I wanted."

A light breeze blew over them gently, ruffling the grass in the Burrow backyard. The three of them silently stared out into the country-side, lost in their contemplations.

"What are we going to do now?" Ron said softly.

Bella and Hermione looked at him mildly. Ron rolled his eyes. "You know, with Voldemort and all. What's our plan of action?"

Bella stretched out. "You guys get back to school. I continue training. The order holds fort."

Hermione and Ron exchanged dodgy looks. "We've been meaning to have a chat about this whole plan of yours by the way." Hermione said in a casual tone, that didn't fool Bella.

"If this about my ditching school, then forget it."

"No not about that. We get that. We've just been wondering what you're upto?"

"Come again?"

Ron propped himself up using his elbows and gave her a disdainful look.

"You don't think we're that stupid do you? We've been keeping tabs on you. You're keeping a low profile. Your training with Snape and what you're doing remains completely unknown even to order members. And to top it all off, you're keeping yourself aloof from your family. This definitely has the signs of you being up to something."

Bella's lips twitched. "Well... I'll be honest. I have a shadow of a plan. But it depends on a lot of uncertain factors."

"A plan that doesn't involve the Order or Dumbledore?" asked Hermione shrewdly.

Bella nodded a little grimly. "It's for the best."

"Does Snape know?"

"I think he has a vague idea. But he's not probing. I think he's watching, though."

"Bella... Don't go alone."

"This is war Ron. We can't afford to play this game fair any more. The other side certainly isn't. The Order will not and cannot dirty their hands. But I can."

"You have no idea what you're taking about." Hermione said angrily. "You'll be willing to sink to Voldemort's level?"

Bella lips twisted to a lopsided smile. "You've heard them all... Dumbledore, McGonagall... hell, even Voldemort himself. I'm like him. I am his reflection. And therein lies my greatest advantage. I'm the only one who can read him, play his game and even beat him at it."

"He's got a fifty year head start Bella." Ron said, raising his eyebrows.

Bella nodded. "Yes. But his entire empire is built on weak foundations. I just need to break the few critical beams and I can bring him down."

"You're theorizing."

"Not quite. I have enough data to substantiate my assumptions. What do you know about Occlumency?"

"You're breaking into his mind?"

"No. I'm allowing him in while I protect myself. It's sort of a mutual transition place. He just doesn't realize his thoughts are giving him away. I catch ideas, snippets of conversations from long ago..."

"Bella, this is really really advanced." Hermione said, utterly perplexed. "Even the most trained and experienced wizards can't do this."

Bella nodded. "Snape was surprised as well. But I don't think this has anything to do with my skill. I think the connection between Voldemort and I allows me to examine his unguarded thoughts without him being aware of the intrusion. The only thing I have to watch out for is that he doesn't try the same with me. It's one of the main things Snape and I are working on."

"And what did you catch in his mind that's gotten you convinced that you need to go solo?"

"What do you know about Horcruxes?"

An hour later Bella floo'd herself into Godric's Hollow, to find Remus pacing the hearth looking extremely stressed.

"You're wearing the carpet out." she told him.

"The situation at the Ministry is finally settling down. Scrimgeour retains power and all the officials from the alternate reality have been accommodated. There were a lot of compromises, but I think we can safely say it's a solid truce between various parties and people."

"So why are you looking like a harassed expectant father outside the delivery room?"

"Fudge won't budge. He's demanding a position of power as compensation."

"And what does that incorrigible asshole want?"

"Head of the Department of Law Enforcement."

"The one that Sirius and Dad are heading?"

"Yes."

"Fudge clearly doesn't value his testicles."

Remus laughed. Then he sobered up quickly. "It gets worse."

"Oh joy. Do tell."

"He's wants to negotiate with the Girl-Who-Lived to vouch for him publicly to remove the stain of irresponsibility that the media heaped on him after it came to light that he had falsely accused and sent you to Azkaban and refused to face the truth of Voldemort's return."

Remus braced himself for Bella's fury but was startled to see her look almost awed.

"I'm impressed. I thought he had no balls, but it must take some guts to demand such a thing. For a second there I almost respected him."

Remus chuckled. "Sirius almost used the Cruciatus on him after that."

Remus waited expectantly for Bella to react but she didn't say a word. Remus looked at her closely. There was a hint of speculation in her eyes which made him uneasy.

His musing was interrupted by Lily, who rushed in for a hug from the still distracted Bella. Remus wished he could read her mind and put an end to whatever idea had taken hold of her.

"Your Father and Sirius are on their way. And I also think I ought to warn you: They've had a rough day." Lily told Bella, kissing her lovingly on the forehead.

Bella rolled her eyes. "Which basically means Sirius is going to put even more effort than normal to be a jerk. Point noted. I won't rise to his baits. Are you happy?"

Lily chuckled. James and Lily found Bella and Sirius' hysterical and angry confrontations hilarious. Remus couldn't help wondering if they would be just as amused if they found out the true nature of the relationship between their daughter and best friend.

James waved his wand at the door and replaced all the protective charms. Sirius was hissing furiously, telling Remus and Lily about

their long, exasperating day at the Ministry. James decided right then and there he wasn't going to report for work the next day.

I have enough and more saved up leave days. I cannot survive work tomorrow without killing somebody.

Sirius' voice had gone up a notch in his agitation and he was shushed by Lily.

"Bella's sleeping in the living room. Don't wake her up! I think this is the first time in days she's getting some rest."

Sirius' eyes widened. "Bella's here?" The longing and relief in his voice made Remus feel sorry for him and considering that Bella was showing no signs of letting up on whatever she was doing that kept her away from Godric's Hollow, he was in for a prolonged period of misery.

Lily and James were wrapped up with one another and Remus watched as Sirius silently slipped out of the room. Why does everything have to be so out of control and complicated?

"Moony?" said James, breaking him out of his reverie. "I'm not reporting for work tomorrow. Do you want to go to Gringotts tomorrow? You wanted to speak to the Goblins about the curses they use to embed the prisoner to the walls. I'm planning to go to Diagon Alley and I know you'd like the company."

Remus nodded gratefully. "Absolutely. What are you going there for anyway?"

"To see what's happening with the restoration. And also check the patrols set up there so that the Death Eaters don't interrupt the rebuilding."

Lily opened her mouth, then closed it. Remus knew what she was going to say. The same question was at the tip of his tongue but he knew asking it would set James off.

"Why are we even bothering to rebuild?" the unasked question was aired, but the quiet voice was neither of theirs. Bella stood at the doorway, looking dishevelled and barely rested, her arm around Sirius's waist, her head resting against his shoulders.

James pursed his lips and Remus knew that had it been anybody else asking that question, they would've been at the receiving end of some serious lashing.

"Why shouldn't we?" asked James evenly. "Do you expect us to sit on the rubble, forever reminded of what havoc was unleashed there?"

Bella raised her eyebrows. "I think it's a waste of resources. Nobody will return to Diagon Alley any time soon. And you can't afford the security you've provided there. Those men would be doing a greater service hunting down Death Eaters or protecting other wizarding centres that are still standing."

"Diagon Alley is more than just a meeting point Bella. It's symbolic of the wizarding culture in Britain. We would be disrespecting ourselves if we let it stand broken like that." James sounded frustrated, his expression defensive and closed.

Remus almost laughed at the way Bella's face mirrored James. Like father, like daughter.

Bella's voice took on a tone similar to James' cold one. "Noble. Tell me, can your government support this...er...idealism? They seem to be far too preoccupied deciding whose backside warms which chair. Idealism is commendable Dad. Maybe some muscle behind some serious effort to ending this war should be made priority."

James' eyes flashed and everybody with the exception of Bella stiffened, recognizing the danger. Sirius stepped forward slightly, gently easing Bella behind him, as if to shield her from James' anger.

"What," spat James. "Would you know about war, Bella? This reality has been fighting for decades, without respite!"

Bella's eyes narrowed. "And yet Voldemort thrives. If your ridiculous political theatrics were non-existent, he might be weaker."

"And who do you think you are to judge? Do you even know what it's like to be in charge? You're a delusional child who thinks she's God's gift to the Light side."

"James!" hissed Lily, looking alarmed.

"And you're a clueless pureblood who thinks he's the end all and know all of everything in this world." snapped back Bella.

"Alright! That's enough!" Sirius cut in, looking furious.

He turned and grabbed Bella by the shoulder. "You apologize to your father right now!"

"The hell I'm going to..." began Bella angrily but she was cut off by Sirius once more.

"Now!"

"And you can't talk like that to your own daughter James!" added Lily angrily.

James and Bella glared at one another. Remus stepped in, holding up his hands wearily.

"Why don't both of you get some food and sleep?" he interjected gently. "I'm sure some sugar in your blood stream will help. And you're tired. Stop screaming at each other. You'll feel worse about this tomorrow morning if it gets further."

Bella and James both continued to glare at each other.

All five of them jumped slightly as the fire crackled and turned green. Dumbledore spun out of the fireplace, and straightened up. His eyebrows rose at the scene in front of him. His appearance seemed to jolted something in Bella and she pulled herself free from Sirius' grip.

"Good night." she said stiffly to the room in general and strode to the fireplace.

"Aren't you staying here tonight?" asked Dumbledore mildly. "Severus said you were planning to spend the next three days here."

"Change of plans. I'd rather be someplace else." she replied curtly, hurling Floo powder into the flames and stepping inside.

"Wait.." began James, suddenly looking abashed. Bella had never ever stayed more than a few hours and he felt miserable at the thought that his short temper had put an end to a potentially long stay. But before Bella could vanish, Sirius had leapt forward and grabbed her arm and pulled her back into the room.

"We," he stated firmly, sounding scarily sensible and level headed. "are not going to misbehave today. This weekend, we will behave like civilized people and spend time with the family. Nobody is allowed to storm off and throw tantrums. And nobody is allowed to say unnecessarily spiteful things to one another."

Remus blinked at that. Lily and James looked surprised at Sirius' words. James felt a little wierded out by how much he sounded like his mother Dorea.

"Am I clear?" asked Sirius, looking around at all of them expectantly, stopping to give Bella a particularly hard look.

Dumbledore bit back a laugh. Must be a tough job - Secret Lover, Godfather and Best Friend to the parent of the angsty teenage girl in question. This tops the list of thankless jobs in the world. Trust Sirius Black to land himself in the position.

Bella curled up inside her comforter. James had dissolved the fight by pulling her into his arms and keeping her there for the rest of the evening. Neither apologized to the other, but atleast they weren't fighting any more. Bella glanced at the clock. It was well past midnight and she waited impatiently for Sirius to sneak into her room.

It was almost half past one when he finally did. Wordlessly, he climbed on to her bed and slipped inside her blanket. She was halfway to turning to face him when his lips attacked hers. Bella felt her body coil tightly from all the expectation of being so close to him.

"Mum and Dad..." Bella gasped out as his lips moved hungrily over her neck.

"They're really busy from the sounds of it." Sirius said, his pulling her shirt up and off her body.

"I really didn't need to know that."

"They're always at it. Like wild creatures during springtime..."

"Sirius. Mental images I can live without. I'm not even turned on now."

"We'll see about that..." he whispered as he tugged her shorts off, his hands languidly trailing upwards, wiping her mind blissfully blank, save for the sensation of his skin on hers.

"It's almost morning." Bella mumbled sleepily as she woke up to the sound of the birds chirping outside. "You need to go."

"Hmmm." mumbled Sirius, holding her more tightly.

"Sirius..." Bella shook him harder. Sirius cracked an eyelid open and held her gaze.

"Are you doing anything today?" he asked her, his eyes struggling to stay open.

"No. Professor Snape all but threw me out for the next couple of days. I'm on forced holiday."

"I think this is the first time I've ever felt gratitude towards Snivelyly."

"I can't believe you still the nicknames you gave him in school. How sad are you?"

"He hasn't changed much since school."

"Neither have you, apparently."

"I'm young at heart."

"That's a nice way of stating you're an immature brat."

"We can't all be middle-aged at fifteen."

"Moving on.. What is it?"

"I need to do something." said Sirius softly.

"What's that?"

Sirius took a deep breath. "Dumbledore wants me to go to Grimmauld Place and explicitly order Kreacher to keep his mouth shut."

Bella was fully awake. "Remus said..."

"I know. But for some reason, the Death Eaters seem to be forestalling us at every turn the last one week. It's more likely that they have a wizard spy but Dumbledore wants to close all loops."

"You want me to come with you." stated Bella, looking uncomfortable.

"My mother's alive here. I haven't seen her in around twenty years and I'm not keen on landing up there by myself."

"Coward."

"You're one to talk. How long have you been hiding with Snape and making excuses to stay away from here?"

"That's different."

"Sure. As if. Will you come?"

Bella remained silent, tracing her pinky lightly over his bare chest.

"Bella?" his voice was almost a plea.

"Alright."

A/N:

Yeah I know that was a small chapter with little plot progress. But it has been a month and I need some oil to kick start the engine. And I promise you the next chapter will be big and the plot will build up to the climax I am hoping for.

So yeah. Forgive the brevity in this one. Cheers :)

Right then, in keeping with the promise, here's the next chapter. It is short. Sorry about that. But I will keep trying to upload as often as I can rather than attempt a large chapter till February (when my projected workload is a lot less!)

Thanks for the reviews and encouragement. Will keep this going and upload atleast once a week, even if the chapters are not the average size of what I normally write.

Cheers! And a very, very Happy New Year :)

- Broken Ink Bottles

The ancient door stood dead still, cold and angry. It made Bella wonder if anybody really lived in there at all.

'Perhaps they were mistaken. Maybe she did die after all...' Guilt washed over her even before she could finish the thought. It was Sirius's mother in question and it wasn't a nice thing to think even if she was a psychotic bitch.

"Maybe she did die after all... Just that nobody knows..." mumbled Sirius. The hope underlying his words could not possibly be mistaken for anything else. Bella's guilt washed away. 'No love lost there, then.' But she elbowed him sharply for what it was worth.

"Let's just get this over with." sighed Sirius. He raised his wand and lightly tapped the door. It swung open slowly, creaks emanating from the ancient hinges.

"It's considered a common courtesy to knock, you know."

"Oh yes, because my mum's going to make the effort to come answer the door and receive us with utmost courtesy. I am surprised that the damn thing opens at my command. I was sure she'd have jinxed it make sure I could never put my foot back in here."

Their voices had automatically lowered and they were conversing in hushed tones. They slowly tip toed down the corridor, past the silent, gnarled portraits. Bella tensed up, waiting for the inevitable wailing of Mrs Black to commence before she realized that she wasn't dead yet and her portrait wouldn't have found its way in here. The thought

brought her no comfort. Next to her, Sirius had a vice grip on her hand, indicating he was worse off.

"How do we get to Kreacher without running into your mum?" Bella asked anxiously, as they slipped into the kitchen.

Sirius opened his mouth to reply but it wasn't his voice that answered her.

"You won't. Welcome to Grimmauld Place, Miss Potter. Sirius."

The ancient armchair by the fireplace swiveled around and Bella's jaw dropped in shock. The woman seated on it was clearly in her late 50s. She held herself with rigidity that Bella had only ever seen in Professor McGonagall in her angriest of tirades against her and Ron. She was a woman who had aged well. Her eyes were fixed on her, steel grey and cold. Sirius's eyes.

"Mother." said Sirius curtly.

All Bella could think was 'What the fuck...? Whoever painted her portrait did a seriously crap job. And please make her stop staring at me...'

Almost as if she could hear Bella's thoughts, Mrs Black shifted her glance to her son.

"I see you've finally decided to visit your poor mother. But of course, you aren't here for me. You never are."

"Well I know how much of a heartache that must be to you." Sirius replied, irony dripping from every syllable.

A bitter smile slowly etched itself on her face. "Indeed. I was a fool to think you might have learnt some civility, after all these years. But never matter... My hopes for you were never too high. I'm just satisfied you aren't here to physically hurt me. I always expected you to be the one to completely destroy me."

Sirius's face was becoming progressively darker. Familial disputes usually sent Bella running for cover, her discomfort over domestic issues usually sky high due to the fact she just didn't understand families, never having really had one herself. The Dursleys rarely

disagreed, what with her being the constant, common enemy. In fact, Bella supposed she might've been responsible for some uncommonly, remarkable family bonding. True to her nature, she unconsciously started backing away, trying to slip her hand out of Sirius's, as the mother and son combination in front of her started looking terribly alike, their faces twisting with hatred and disgust. Apparently, she hadn't been as discrete as she had assumed because Mrs Black's eyes snapped to their entwined fingers.

Uh Oh...

Mrs Black looked up at her with a guarded expression. "So it's true... Kreacher was right about you two."

Defiance stole over Sirius's stance and Bella wished she hadn't let herself get talked into coming here.

"Mrs Black..." she began nervously.

"Walburga." The regal lady interrupted, her expression neutral, completely ignoring her son.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Call me Walburga. That is my name and it is my wish that you address me thus."

Bella blinked. 'Say what?'

"I... er. Yes. Walburga." stuttered Bella. She truly understood why Sirius was wary of his mother. Bella had never been afraid of anything in her life but the woman in front of her unnerved her in a way that would've made Snape Walburga Black's devoted groupie.

"And I shall call you Bella."

"Yes... Of course..." Bella responded blandly. It wasn't like she had asked and she wasn't sure how to respond to declarations like that.

"What are you playing at mother?" Sirius barked out, his expression a mixture of alarm and irritation. Judging from his reaction, Bella could only surmise that Walburga Black was not in the habit of happily tossing out first name privileges to anybody. 'Lucky me...'

Walburga didn't even bother looking at him. Her eyes fixed on Bella, she said, "Kreacher is expecting you. I can assure you he will not repeat to anybody what he told me. But undoubtedly, you would want to reinforce this yourself. He's upstairs, in your father's room."

Sirius didn't relax his posture. "And what is your story in this mother? Why the sudden support, after all these years?"

Walburga looked at him disdainfully. "I'm not doing this for you, Sirius. I'm just determined not to assist the Dark Lord in any way. This is my service in honour of your brother. I couldn't care less about you. Now, get out of my sight and my house as soon as you can."

Sirius's limbs lost their rigidity and he didn't bother to mask his relief. "Glad to know that nothing's changed. I'm far too fond of hating you to start changing my opinion."

"Likewise." It was all the response his words invoked from her. Bella fidgeted. 'Dammit Sirius, Move! You can exchange your not-pleasantries some other time when I'm not here! Send her a howler! Now can we please go?'

Sirius sneered at her and Bella mused at how much he looked like Draco Malfoy. 'Must be a genetic thing, that sneer. Black family legacy. So Malfoy must've gotten it from his mother. Not surprising. Lucius Malfoy doesn't look like he can pull that off, being the glorified Barbie doll he is...' The thought that she had sex with someone who looked like non-blonde version of Draco Malfoy at the moment irritated her and she started to drag Sirius out of the room, refusing to dwell on the matter further.

"Wait!" Walburga's voice rang out, stopping her short. 'Now what?'

"Bella?" she was surprised to hear the slightly tentative note in Walburga's voice.

"Mrs Bla... Walburga?" responded Bella cautiously, expecting a barb in return. The fact that no rudeness had come her way yet was astonishing and it would've been too good to be true if she had escaped from Grimmauld Place completely unscathed.

"I was hoping you'd stay down with me while Sirius has his chat with Kreacher. Tea?"

Bella continued to look at her, one hundred percent sure she had heard wrong.

"WHAT?" snarled Sirius.

"Nobody is talking to you, Sirius. Bella? Please?"

"ABSOLUTELY NOT!" roared Sirius, tugging on her arm.

"If Bella does not wish to have my company, she can say so herself."

Bella met Walburga's expectant look with a bemused one of her own.

"I think... Perhaps... It's the best I go with Sirius." Bella finally said. She wondered if she imagined it, but she could've sworn she saw hurt cross Walburga's expression for the briefest moment before her expression took on its schooled neutrality.

"Very well. It was a pleasure to meet you. The doors of Grimmauld Place will always remain open to you. And I hope one day you will take me up on my offer. Goodbye Bella. Good riddance Sirius." With that she swiveled around to face the fireplace once more.

For once, Sirius had nothing to say. His perplexed expression was broken temporarily while bullying Kreacher but resurfaced as Bella and him made their way back to Godric's Hollow.

James looked up from the letter he was reading and Bella, followed by Sirius, stumbled out of the fireplace.

"How'd it go?" he asked warily, his apprehension doubling at Bella's slight frown and Sirius's unnatural silence.

"Fine. Kreacher wasn't the one dishing out dirt on us. My mum ordered him to keep his mouth shut and I reinforced the order. My position in the Black family has been kept intact... so... Fancy that." He said distractedly running his fingers through his hair.

James continued to look between and Bella who was staring out of the window, clearly not really taking the sight in and at his best friend who was squinting at Bella, like he was trying to decipher something vague.

"Your mum...?" probed James. Sirius continued to gaze at Bella as he replied, "Quite alright. After the run ins I had with her portrait in the alternate reality, I was expecting her to be completely unhinged... But... She seems fine. Usual snarky bullshit spouting from her mouth. But she's more anti Voldemort than me. So that's a stroke of good luck. Regulus has turned out to be more useful dead than he ever was alive."

James tried to frown in disapproval at Sirius but gave up. He had never liked his friend's younger brother and personally agreed with Sirius.

"Where's Moony?" asked Bella absently.

"Out on order work." said James. Then hopefully, "Weather outside is nice... Quidditch? We can toss Quaffles around..."

Bella shook her head. "Maybe later. Just let me know when Moony gets back, please? I haven't spoken to him in a while... Want to spend some time with him before I leave for Snape's tomorrow." She wandered into the kitchen, completely missing James' acerbic look that reflected how truly hurt he was about her indifference to him. Sirius gave him a sympathetic pat on his shoulder.

"Give her time James. Bella doesn't do well with emotions. She has some truly awful ways of dealing with people she cares about. She'll become more or less normal with you in a bit."

"I know." James said, his teeth clenched. "But how is she ever going to reach that stage if she keeps hiding behind Snape? She's behaving exactly like my mother did after my dad's death! It eventually drove her to an early grave too!"

Sirius blinked at him, a slow look of comprehension drawing on his handsome face. "Yes... She's exactly like your mother... Dorea Potter." Then so softly that James barely heard him, "Dorea Black." His mother's fascination with Bella started to make sense. And he was suddenly relieved and terrified at the same time. Walburga

Black would stop at nothing to brand whatever and whoever she thought was rightfully hers and from the looks of it, Bella had unwittingly drawn Walburga out of the shadows and spiked her interest. Sirius rubbed his eyes tiredly...

'Oh fuck...'

Chp30